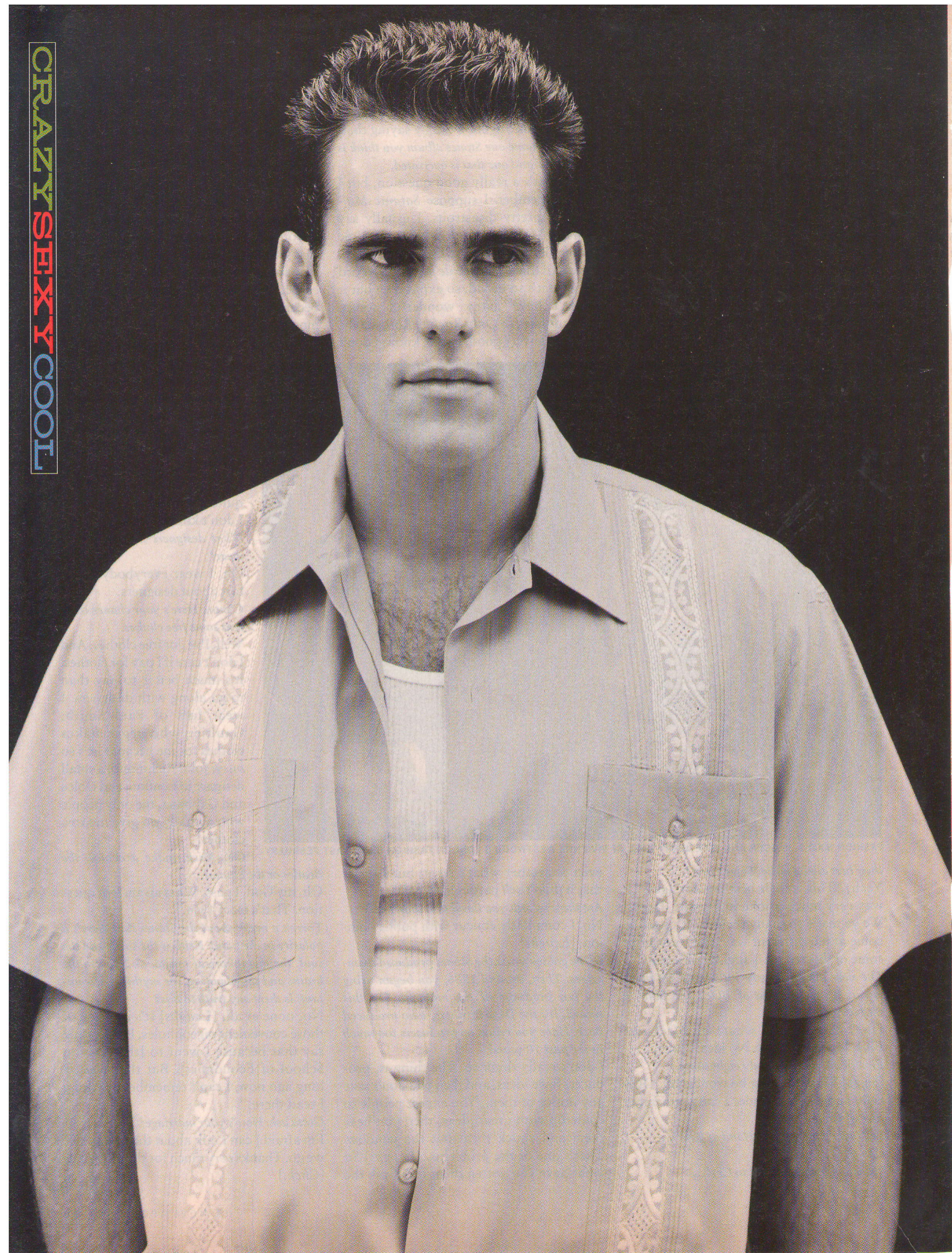


CRAZY SEXY COOL





Although she had only a

single scene with him in their new movie, *In and Out*, Debbie Reynolds had a few keen observations regarding her co-star, Matt Dillon. "Matt has a lot of dramatic ability and a very intense sexuality," says Reynolds. "He has the same smoldering intensity as James Dean, the same quality that the great stars had of being real. He's ruled by the front part of his brain." • Furrowing his heavy brow in a manner that bespeaks numerous roles, Dillon admits that he "totally got" what the screen legend was saying. "I think it means that I have a very active mind," he says in his rented home in Florida, where he's shooting *Wild Things*, a noir thriller. "My dad always says, 'Son, keep it simple. Sometimes you can think things through too much.' " • That the 33-year-old Dillon not only still listens to his elders but freely quotes them is just one of the ►

► many charming idiosyncrasies of an actor who — in his career choices, as well — never fails to surprise. A teen idol right out of the gate with his 1979 debut in the cult classic *Over the Edge*, Dillon quickly monopolized the *Tiger Beat* market with angst-ridden performances in films like *Tex*, *Rumble Fish* and *The Outsiders* before playing against type as a love-struck cabana boy in Garry Marshall's *The Flamingo Kid*. As his teen-dream contemporaries — most notably, Tom Cruise, Keanu Reeves and Johnny Depp — went on to graduate to blockbuster leading-man status, Dillon has maintained a more low-profile but no less impressive career as a hard-working actor in well-crafted ensemble films (*Albino Alligator*, *Beautiful Girls*, *Singles*) while still managing to turn in strong leading performances in quirky independents such as *To Die For*, *Frankie Starlight* and *Drugstore Cowboy*.

In his latest film, *In and Out*, Dillon plays a platinum-tressed movie star who accidentally outs his English teacher (Kevin Kline) at the Academy Awards. "My character is loosely based on what happened to Tom Hanks at the 1994 Oscars," says Dillon. "But I'm not playing Tom Hanks." The role proves not only Dillon's mettle at sending up his own image but his willingness to play small, unglorified roles.

"It's always impressive when an actor will go from the lowest-budget experimental movies to studio films and back again," says *In and Out* screenwriter Paul Rudnick. "Matt's clearly interested in not just taking chances but variety [and] having a good time with his career and not sweating his image so much."

Although Dillon's offscreen image has leaned more toward that of his bad-boy early roles than of his nice-guy later ones, that seems to be changing. These days, while he doesn't exactly shun the nocturnal delights of New York, his current hometown (he grew up in Mamaroneck, N.Y.), his expeditions tend more toward museum visits and gallery openings than the all-night benders of yore. Whether this has anything to do with his recent attachment to actress Cameron Diaz is anyone's guess. But one thing is certain: When her name comes up (which it does despite his very vigilant attempts at deflection), his hard edges soften, his eyes go dewy, and you get the feeling he suddenly wants to be someplace else rather than with you.

You and Cameron Diaz have been a couple for more than a year now. What's special about her? We're just happy together, you know? I enjoy her company. There's not a lot I can fault her with. She's down-to-earth, she's real;

and I feel we mirror each other that way. Friendship, family and loyalty are important to the both of us.

Are you the marrying type?

Am I the marrying type? [Pauses, thinks carefully] Yeah, I could be the marrying type.

Let's talk about 'In and Out.' In the film, your character accidentally outs his high-school English teacher. Are you aware that there has been similar speculation about your sexuality in the past?

Well, it hasn't come up much with me, and most of the time it has — like, one or two times — somebody says that to me and I'm like, "Do I seem like the kind of guy who would...well...you know?" I mean, I don't know where that comes from. Then I say,

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"Is it something I project?" and most people go, "No way! Nobody thinks that."

That's very funny, because that's exactly what 'In and Out' is about — people's misperceptions about gay people and their behavior. Do you think this is the kind of movie that could effect some change?

I think so, because there's a lightness to it, and that's how you can effect change sometimes. When we can all laugh at ourselves about anything and say, "Hey, you know what? We're all humans."

The range of work you've done over the past few years has been pretty impressive.

Well, I feel like there's a lot more I can do if I'm given the opportunity.

For instance?

I'd like to do something classical.

Are you talking about the Bard?

I'd like to do a period piece. I think people see me as a contemporary actor. Well, not to-

tally contemporary — I do have a kind of classic thing. But I'd like to do a western or an adventure movie. I'd also like to do things that are maybe a little more highbrow.

Don't you want to do big action movies, like Nicolas Cage and Tom Cruise?

Yeah! Absolutely! I'd love to do them, and I think I'm well geared for that kind of stuff. I think sometimes you've got to shift your focus. For many years I was drawn more to character parts and less to mainstream stuff. Now I like doing it all.

Do you get offered those parts?

[Laughs] Sometimes more than others.

But you turn them down?

I've turned down a few of them over the course of my career, but I don't have a lot of regrets. I think there have been a few cases where I've said, "I really feel like working," and I've done things that maybe I wouldn't have [otherwise] done.

Well, you've definitely proved your staying power.

Yeah, but I feel like I have to remind myself sometimes when I get disenchanted with the way things are going that I'm just 33. I mean, I still have a lot of time ahead of me. You just have to be patient.

What are you doing next?

The only plan I have right now is to finish *Wild Things* and the script I'm writing, and make a few decisions on some, uh, other things that have come up.

Other things? Well, I've got to ask you about some rumors that are circulating at the moment. What rumors?

Well, that you're, ah...

Getting married or something?

Yep, that'd be one.

Yeah, that's just a total fabrication. First of all, that kind of stuff, I feel, is none of anybody's business, really. I think in this case [Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow] were breaking up and [the media] figured, well, they had to say somebody else was getting married.

Oh, is that how it works?

[Throws hands up, laughs] I don't know! I don't know how that works or where that came from!

Do you want kids?

Yeah. I really don't want to go too deep into all that stuff. It's my personal life, and I want to keep it that way. But if you ask if I'm the marrying type, yeah, I can say that. It's not too personal. I could see myself getting married, but there are no plans any time soon.

You haven't had a lot of high-profile romances. No, I've generally avoided them. I always used to say, "I'll never go out with an actress," and now here I am.