

FRANKLY S P E A K I N G

In this exclusive interview, **William H. Macy**, the star of *Fargo*, *Boogie Nights* and television series *Shameless* talks travel, redemption – and his love for the ukulele

Interview: Michelle Wranik-Hicks

It's been a busy few years for William H. Macy. Since making his directing debut with feature film *Rudderless*, the 12-time Emmy nominee is working on several new projects including *The Layover*, which he describes as a “chick flick about two women finding themselves”. Now with the seventh season of the Emmy award-winning series *Shameless* (in which Macy plays the loathsome yet lovable drunkard Frank Gallagher) set to screen this month, the award-winning actor also stars alongside Mel Gibson in the newly released film *Blood Father*, which follows the story of alcoholic ex-con John Link (Gibson) who is dragged back into his violent past to protect his teenage daughter. Macy plays the character of Kirby, who strives to keep his best friend on the straight and narrow.

Congratulations on *Blood Father* – I just saw it, it's a great film.

Thank you so much, I really enjoyed it. It was more violent than I thought it would be. I didn't realise it would be that bloodthirsty, but I think it's legit. I'm kind of fascinated by the story of a fella being dragged back into his past. It's certainly a story that's been told many times but I find it compelling.

Your character Kirby is more or less the polar opposite to your role as Frank Gallagher in *Shameless*. Is that what drew you to the role?

Possibly – but mostly I wanted to act with Mel Gibson! I'm a huge fan, and have been for many, many years and I dug the script. It was compelling to me. I really believed he wanted to set himself on a righteous path and the past came back to bite him in the butt.

What was it like working with Gibson? Had you met before?

No, I never had. I'd seen him a couple of times on red carpets. He was stunningly in shape. I mean, really in fabulous shape – lean and mean. And he had that fantastic beard – so thick. I have a pretty thick beard myself but I saw that and thought: Ok, kudos to

you, that's quite the beard. He hadn't worked for a long, long time. He put a lot into this project and was quite prepared and thought a lot about it. I really had a good time with him. That wickedly cool sense of humour that we know would come out every once in a while. I loved the idea of being his sponsor. Talk about life and art and all of that stuff.

The film had underlying themes of second chances and redemption. Are you a believer in second chances?

Oh absolutely. I certainly needed them in my life. The older I get, the more I want to live for a long time because I only just figured out how to work this thing, if you follow me. I had such an awkward youth and the first couple of years in this business were so difficult. I was so lost, and it's taken me a long time to get it right. So to answer your question, yes I believe in second chances, absolutely.

I must admit, I'm still playing catch up with *Shameless*.

What are your thoughts on the way we consume television these days and the term “binge watching”?

Well, I grew up with the notion that the audience is never wrong; that the audience is smarter than we are, we who make these movies and these television shows. It is to your peril if you don't listen to them. On binge watching, I have done it myself and I find it overwhelming. When you watch hours and hours of something you get the full effect, or both barrels, to use a gun phrase – all you can think about is that series. My wife Felicity [Huffman] recently caught up with *Shameless* – she watched about four or five years of it in the period of a month. She was overwhelmed by it and I was very pleased that she was very complimentary about it. She liked it. Thought I did pretty good – and that's high praise.

With two teenage girls, is binge watching allowed in the Macy household?

It is. We kept our kids away from television for a long, long time and then my daughter Sophia was doing a somersault and broke

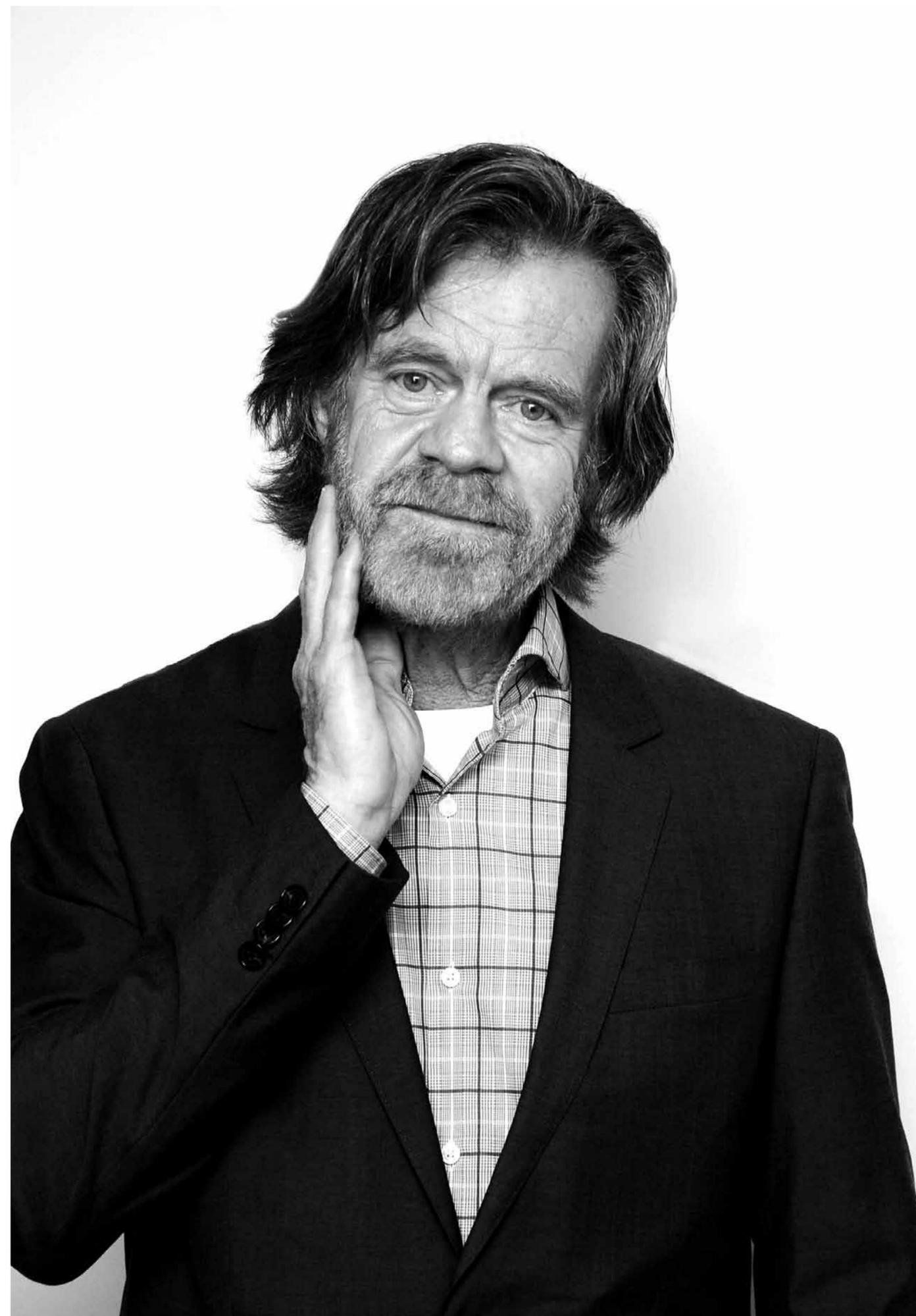


Photo: Getty Images



William H. Macy plays Kirby in *Blood Father* (above left); Macy strikes a pose in the 2015 Screen Actors Guild Awards Variety Portraits

her collar bone and the doctor said: "You've got to keep her quiet for about four weeks." So the genie was out of the bottle, but up until then it was just books and storytelling. It sounds like a cliché but we told stories in our household. We kept our kids away from TV because it's what we did for a living and it's such rarefied air here in Los Angeles growing up in Hollywood with two girls, so we just wanted to give them a leg up in living as much of a real life as we possibly can. They are not too interested in current television, but in the last year they binge-watched *Desperate Housewives* in about a six-month period and *Shameless* a little bit. Every once in a while they will walk out of the room after an episode and just shake their head at me. I say: "Honey, I know, but it's paying the mortgage." However, in saying that, there's a magnificent show called *Curious George*. I was the narrator for the first year, so I've seen how wholesome and wonderful and educational television can be for kids.

I may have only seen a few episodes of *Shameless* but it's clear you love playing Frank – why is that?

Well he's so completely wrong. Frank is a complete narcissist and a rascal, but every once in a while he has the guts to say something that everyone is thinking but no one wants to say. Frank has a wicked, cool sense of humour. He is a moveable party. He is hardworking and resourceful. He is uncommonly smart, I think, and the ladies seem to like him. So what's not to like?

You've worked with so many incredible directors. When you made the transition from acting to directing with *Rudderless*, did you know what sort of director you wanted to be?

Wow, that's a lovely question. I guess the biggest influences for me have been Dave [David] Mamet and Steven Schachter. I met both of them in the very beginning of my career back at Goddard College in Vermont. I think the director's job is to bring to light what the writer had in mind; that's the first allegiance. I see myself to be something of a raconteur. I think I can tell a story and I like my sense of humour. But I think what surprised me about directing was how difficult it is. An actor's purview is seconds; a long scene is 90 seconds and that's what an actor concentrates on and that's how I've lived my life, with these small little nuggets of truth, realisation or movement, but as a director, the world is your purview. You have to see the whole world from the beginning to the end of the story you're telling, and you're running an organisation that's

huge. Even a little film is huge. There are a lot of people walking up to you, saying: "Do you like the red one or blue one?" or "Should we go left or right?" It's thousands of questions and they're all life and death. Choose the blue one in a flippant way, and for the rest of your life, you will say: "Why did I choose the blue one? The red would have been perfect." It's not for the faint of heart.

Speaking of hearts, has yours been stolen by directing?

The jury is out on that. I've directed three. I've got two in the can that will come out in the next year. Should one of them be wildly successful and studied in film class for the next hundred years, I think I could be persuaded to keep at it.

You've spoken about your love of the ukulele and how it makes you "self soothe" – why do you love it so much?

I played guitar ever since I was a kid and I started playing the ukulele around 10 years ago. It's tiny, so you can take it anywhere with you; it's quiet, so you don't disturb people when you play it, and it's funny. The second you take it out of the case, everyone laughs, so if you can make some music come out of the thing, you're way ahead of the game. I'm not a fan of Hawaiian music per se but I do love 1920s and 30s music. It's got such a distinct sound and it's so happy. I'm crazy about it. I started writing birthday songs with it and it's kept me busy, because there's three women in my life and three birthdays a year.

What about travel – is it a love of yours, and is the ukulele in your suitcase?

With these films coming out, I hope to do some travelling to promote them. I think *Shameless* will go on for a year or two and after that my daughters will be off in college, and I want to travel with the wife. I'd like to see the Great Wall, the pyramids, South America and the Amazon, the glaciers while they're still glaciers. Paris and London, Istanbul – I'd love to go back there. The ukulele is always in my bag. If I'm gone more than three or four days, I've got a ukulele with me. That's what I love about it. You can stick it in a bag or a backpack. I also ride motorbikes and go on five- or six-day road trips. I have a bag that sits over the seat on the back of the motorbike and to that, I fix my ukulele case. Here I go, roaring past on a vintage Harley Davidson and the last thing you see is a ukulele. I think I'm the coolest guy on the road. I would sleep with me in a nanosecond.