



Joaquin Phoenix not quitting acting just yet



Is he or isn't he? Quitting acting, that is.

Friday night, the maddeningly enigmatic Joaquin Phoenix will be in the spotlight as the Toronto International Film Festival unveils Casey Affleck's "I'm Still Here," the is-it-real-or-is-it-an-elaborate-put-on documentary about Phoenix's self-proclaimed retirement from acting to focus on a hip-hop career.

Cutting through all the fog, one thing is clear: Hollywood has not given up on Phoenix, and he has not turned his back on Hollywood. Any talk of his retirement definitely is premature.

Although Phoenix has not signed up for his next role, he recently was in negotiations to star with Jeremy Renner in "The Raven," a period thriller from Intrepid Pictures and FilmNation that centers on Edgar Allan Poe.



Phoenix would have played Poe to Renner's police detective, but the deal fell through last month when Renner moved on to do "Mission: Impossible 4." The Poe role ended up going to John Cusack.

"Raven" was the closest Phoenix has come to boarding a movie, but there have been other close calls.

The actor was in talks to star with Sean Penn in "Genius," the story of literary editor Max Perkins that is being put together by producer Bill Pohlad. It centers on the relationship between Perkins and young novelist Thomas Wolfe, and Phoenix was eyeing the showy role of Wolfe.

He also circled "The Sitter" and even got a real offer from Fox to play a drug dealer in the Jonah Hill comedy about a college student who is talked into baby-sitting the three misfit kids next door.

Why Phoenix never went for the roles is unclear, though if there are germs of truth in "I'm Still Here," his complicated relationship with the craft of acting and its attendant celebrity could be a factor.

The whole mystery took on an extra layer of complexity Thursday when word circulated that a Phoenix impostor was tricking fans by hitting the fest's red carpets and pretending to be the Oscar-nominated actor. The only problem with the reports is that there had been no independent sightings of the impostor because no red-carpet events had taken place.

When reached for comment, a publicist for the impostor -- yes, even impostors are required to have publicists -- responded, "You be the judge"; he said his client claims to be the real Phoenix; and he predicted that there would be "a showdown" at the movie's screening when the two Phoenixes come face to face.

While his camp would not comment on projects he has not signed for, some speculate he could be waiting for the release of the documentary, which Magnolia opens today in select theaters, before jumping back into his acting career with both feet.

Speaking of feet, there is one role to which Phoenix is attached: that of a foot and shoe fetishist who also is an amazing footwear designer in the indie "Big Shoe."

Those who have read it describe the script, which combines dramatic and comedic elements, as "out there but cool." The project -- to be directed by Steven Shainberg, who tackled fetishism with 2002's "Secretary" -- has not assembled financing, so who knows whether Phoenix will do more than dip his toe in it.

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