

# CALLING THE SHOTS

Peter Facinelli on manifesting his childhood dream, *Hour of Lead*, portraying cult leader Keith Raniere, and almost passing on *Twilight*

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It's a sunny Sunday morning in early July when Peter Facinelli and I meet. He arrives at The Gramercy Park Hotel with his girlfriend, actress Lily Anne Harrison, and his youngest daughter, Fiona —the three came in from Long Island where he was visiting family. New York is a brief respite before the actor returns to Canada to finish filming.



Peter and I settle into a booth in the hotel restaurant, Maialino, which is abuzz with brunch diners. The New York native, who now resides in Los Angeles, is sporting an LAHH camo baseball cap, a black t-shirt with an unbuttoned blue button-up, light-colored jeans, and a five-o'clock shadow. "Thanks for having me in the magazine," Peter starts off. Once our waitress finishes taking his order—an Americano and brioche toast with jelly—Peter tells me about his current project. "I'm filming a movie [*The NXIVM Cult: A Mother's Nightmare*] about the cult, NXIVM—basically, a self-help program for women run by a man, Keith Raniere. It has been around for twenty years, actually, but in the last couple of years, Keith, who started this program, also started this underground division asking some of the women to be part of this sex slave cult thing," he explains. The movie is based on actress Catherine Oxenberg and her daughter, India, who was one of NXIVM's sex slaves, and Catherine's fight to get India out of the cult and deprogram her.

NXIVM and *Smallville*'s Allison Mack, NXIVM's queen bee, made news headlines in early 2018. In June 2019, Keith was convicted on all charges brought against him, including sex trafficking, forced labor conspiracy, human trafficking and multiple counts of racketeering, including sexual exploitation of a child; he faces up to life in prison. "I can't say I'm having fun at work, because it's not fun to play this guy, it's been a challenge though. No one walks around thinking they're a bad person, so I have to find a reasoning behind why he does what he does. People joke about cults, but it's out there. Brainwashing is a real thing," Peter says solemnly.

To prepare, Peter studied interviews Keith has given. "You try to focus more on the essence of them than parakeet how they move—things that you pick up, mannerisms and speech patterns." Playing this "stomach-churning" role appealed to Peter as it is unlike any character he has portrayed. "You can't always play the hero riding in on the horse, sometimes you play the other parts, too. That's sometimes scary, because who wants to play somebody who has no redeeming qualities? Sometimes with bad guys, you can have fun with it and the audience loves to hate them, but it's scarier to play characters that people just hate." Peter also took this role so that he could bring some attention to this story. He thought it was important to highlight, since he has three daughters. "I felt like people should watch this so they can understand and recognize, 'Oh, maybe what I'm in is a cult.' Because there are signs to watch out for." The following day, Peter was scheduled to wrap up

filming on this movie, and then return home to finish the final cut of his film, *Hour of Lead*.

*Hour of Lead* is a film that Peter wrote, directed, and acted in. Starring Thomas Jane, Anne Heche, and Jason Patric, Peter describes *Hour of Lead* as a whodunit, Hitchcock-like thriller. A family of three go to an RV park and while there, their daughter goes missing. Peter opted for a minor role—he plays Deputy Rakes—since he was busy directing the film. "I used to have an RV and I remember pulling up to an RV park and there was this prison two miles down the road. The guy who owned the RV park said, 'If you hear one or two gunshots, that's normal, but if you hear more than two, come to the front desk. Sometimes they do drills or tests, one or two gunshots is OK.' So I started imagining: What would happen if a convict escaped? What happens if your daughter goes missing in the woods? It's a parent's worst nightmare. And then I wrote it and I was fortunate enough to make it."

This is the first feature film that Peter has both written and directed. Writing the screenplay came fairly easy to him, and only took three weeks. Getting the film made was a bigger challenge that took seven years. "I had it set up a couple of times and then money falls out. And then I get a movie, then I'd have to go shoot a movie. Then, it would fall apart. There were times where I wasn't going to direct it, and another director was going to direct it. I was going to star in it. Then, there were times where I got busy and I was just going to have it made and someone was going to direct it with somebody else in it—I was just going to produce it. Finally, after I'd done my first feature [*Breaking & Exiting*], I thought, No, I think I should direct this one—so I did, and then the money came for it." He takes a sip of his Americano.

Peter never studied filmmaking; he learned everything he knows from working on sets as an actor for the last 25 years. "There's stuff that I've learned through osmosis that I don't even know that I know. On the day, I'm like, 'Let's do this, do this, this, and this.' And it's coming out of me—I didn't even know I knew that—because you're subconsciously picking it up after hundreds of movies and TV shows and you're just on set all the time." Though each day brought new challenges, Peter loved the whole experience. "I try to be really prepared as a director. Really know what I want to get. I always have a Plan A, Plan B, somewhat of a Plan C, and then I'm open. At that point, if none of those work, then you know you have enough knowledge to make something work." For example, Peter didn't have the equipment he needed his first day on the set of *Hour of Lead* and had to

## He's a cat person

"People always have really interesting names for their cats," Peter muses. "Like, if I was a cat, I'd be hanging out. 'What's your name?' I'd be like, 'Whiskers. Frisky. What's your name?' 'Butch.'" His cat's name is Maisy, The Great Catsby. "My kids liked Maisy, so I settled because Maisy is like Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*, so I was like alright, Maisy, The Great Catsby. I had two cats; they were named Butch Catsidy and the Sundance Kitty, which is the best names ever. And they escaped. I had them on the back porch. I put them out there 'cause they liked it, and then one day, I came home and that porch screen was just sliced open and Butch and Sunny ran into the sunset and never came back. I was like, they rode off into the sunset together, I guess."





“The next time my parents said, ‘What do you want to be?’ I said, a lawyer, because the first time I said, ‘an actor,’ they laughed at me. I said a lawyer the second time, they were like, ‘Wow! A lawyer.’ So I was like, *They like that. I’ll keep saying that.*”

think fast. “What do you do? You don’t have backup equipment that you need. Actors are staring at you. What do you do? Literally, my brain just goes into overdrive.... All of a sudden, I’m doing really creative blocking to make up for the camera not moving,” he explains passionately.

What Peter enjoys most about directing is the collaborative process —as the director, he gets to work with all of the departments, more so than when he’s simply acting in a project. However, his desire to spend more time in the director’s chair, doesn’t mean he wants to give up acting. “I don’t think I’ll ever hang up my helmet [and be, like], ‘I don’t want to act anymore,’ because I love acting. But I do find directing, at this stage in my life, a bigger challenge. As an actor, you’re a small cog in a big wheel. A lot of times, the actor gets all the credit. I mean, the director is really picking every piece of music, every frame, every costume, every nuance —it’s all the director’s choice... I find film and television is more of a director’s medium than an actor’s medium. The stage of a play is an actor’s medium. A director can tell you all day long, ‘Play it this way,’ and you get up on the stage and the audience is watching you and you’re going to play it whichever way you’re playing it that night and the audience is going to walk away with that. There’s nothing a director can do about it, except yell at you the next day.” Neither of these titles —actor and director— really suit Peter, he prefers “storyteller” as it encompasses acting, writing, producing, and directing.

Acting remains one of Peter’s greatest passions. “I love being able to do the research on that character... There’s something really nice about just putting your life aside for a second and then being able to jump into someone’s life and get a feel for what it would be like to be that person just for a small

amount of time.” Peter tells me that he was 10 when he realized that he wanted to be an actor when he grew up. One day, while watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, he thought that Paul Newman and Robert Redford looked like they were having the best time ever and decided then and there that he wanted to be just like them. “And then, I told my parents, and they laughed, so then I never mentioned it again. The next time my parents said, ‘What do you want to be?’ I said, a lawyer, because the first time I said, ‘an actor,’ they laughed at me. I said a lawyer the second time, they were like, ‘Wow! A lawyer.’ So I was like, *They like that. I’ll keep saying that.*” He smiles. “So, when anyone asked, ‘What do you want to be?’ ‘A lawyer.’ ‘Wow, a lawyer!’” Peter nods his head to emphasize their approval.

Extremely shy in high school, Peter shares that he mostly kept to himself. “I was so shy in high school that I didn’t eat. I didn’t want to get in the lunch line because there was so many people. Imagine going to this giant auditorium, you’re this pimply-faced 15-year-old kid, there’s 3,500 people on line for a hamburger and I’d get so anxious that I’d drop something or that the whole auditorium would stare at me, that I would go to the opposite side and there was this old lady who sold pretzels and orange juice and I would just grab a pretzel and would sit down before everyone else and sneak by.” He laughs at the memory. “I was such a wallflower in high school, I don’t even think that people know I went to that school.”

It wasn’t until college that Peter began to pursue acting. While attending St. John’s University, where he was studying pre-law, Peter took Acting 101 as an elective. “It was very freeing for me because I could be somebody else. I could do anything and wasn’t shy —there’s nothing to be shy about because it wasn’t me. I remember there was a kid there and he said,

“I always thought if you put all my characters in one room, it’d be a fun party.”

“Wow, this is really fun, but what are the chances of us ever making a living out of this?” I got so mad that he said that. I was like, *I’m going to make a living out of this.*” After a year at St. John’s, Peter transferred to NYU to study theater, and told his parents the acting classes would ultimately help him as a lawyer. “‘You have to get up in front of jurors and I’m really shy, so these acting classes are going to help me be a better lawyer.’ And they didn’t know any better, so they said, ‘OK.’ Yeah, they’re still waiting for me to be a lawyer,” he adds with a smile.

Peter has been making a living as an actor since 1995 — just as he planned. This fall, you can also catch him in the films, *Running with the Devil* and *Countdown*. The former is a crime drama that Peter stars in alongside Nicholas Cage and Laurence Fishburne. “You’re watching how this drug affects all these people as it moves into different hands. I play an officer [Number One], and he’s after The Cook [Nicholas] and The Man [Laurence]. That was fun,” he says about *Running with the Devil*. *Countdown* is a thriller / horror film, whose IMDb description reads: We follow three true stories from three diverse high school students as they struggle against unrealistic expectations, stress, and an uphill battle against time. “Sometimes you take a thing for different reasons. I like the director [Justin Dec] on *Countdown*. I thought the script was fun. I liked the company STX. It’s hard. You never know — *is this going to be good?* Nobody goes into a movie going, Hey, let’s make a terrible movie. Everybody tries to make a good movie, it’s not always easy,” Peter muses.

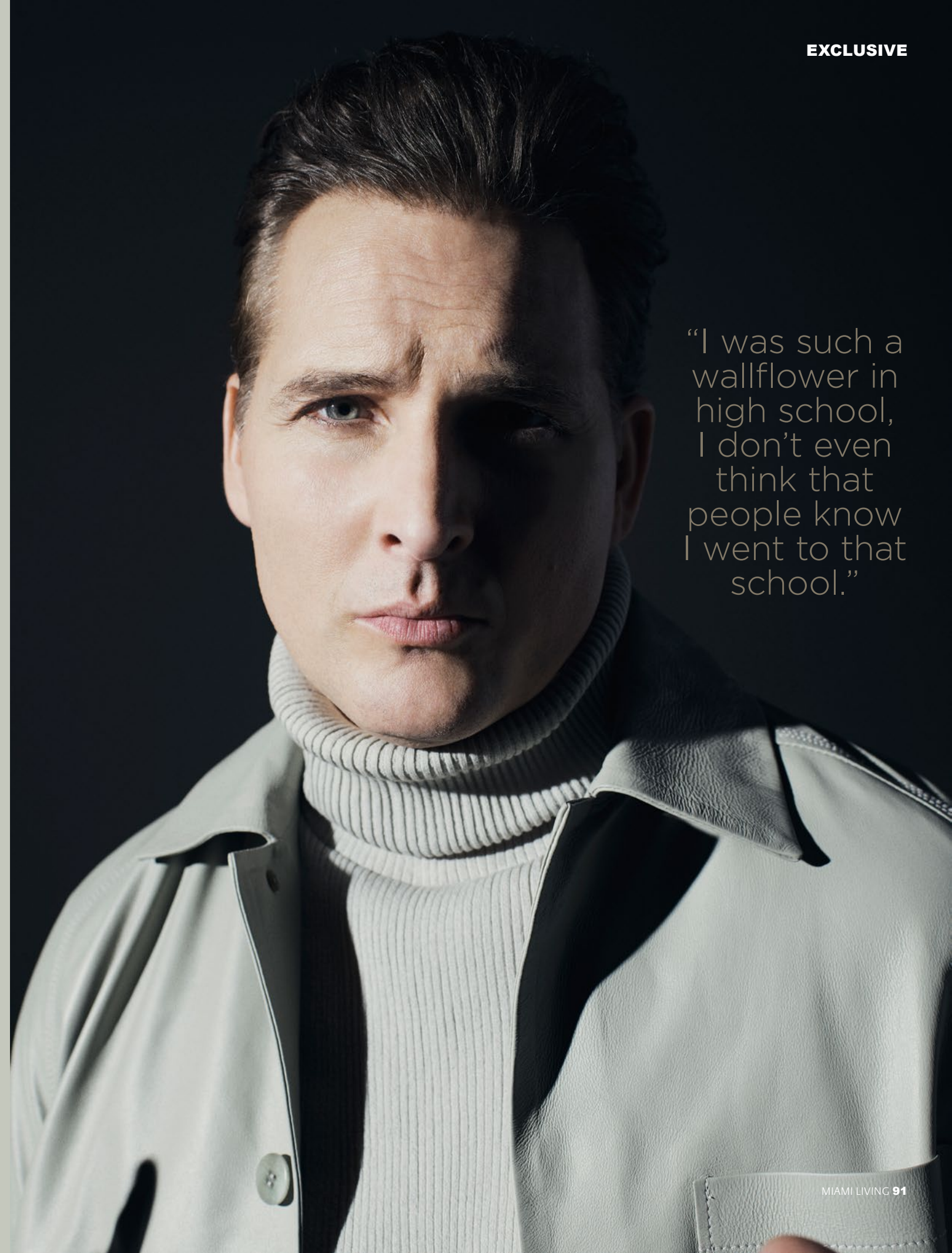
You can have the best names in entertainment attached to a film, and this still doesn’t guarantee a blockbuster hit. It’s hard to predict whether a film or TV show will be a success or a flop. When Peter’s agents first mentioned *Twilight* (one of the largest film franchises he has starred in) to him, he initially declined. “They [his agents] said, ‘You want to do a

vampire movie? I said, ‘no,’ they asked, ‘why?’ I was like, ‘I don’t want to do blood and guts.’ I was thinking some old guy in a cape somewhere with a stake through the heart. Y’know? Some B vampire movie.” His agents advised him to read Stephenie Meyer’s novel —as soon as he did, he had a change of heart. “It was *fantastic*. Vampire stuff is really the backdrop of this beautiful love story,” Peter explains. And when he found out that Catherine Hardwicke was directing, he was sold. The next day, he went in to audition and landed the role of Cullen family patriarch, Dr. Carlisle Cullen. Peter went on to shoot all five movies in The *Twilight Saga* film series.

Is there a role that you would like to play and haven’t played yet? “I feel like I’ve done almost every genre now, so it’s a tough question. Because even in every genre, there’s different things to play.” Peter has portrayed three doctors —in *Twilight*, *Nurse Jackie*, and *Countdown* — yet, all have been completely different, he explains. He is always on the prowl for roles that aren’t familiar. “I always thought if you put all my characters in one room, it’d be a fun party.” He smiles and continues. “Like, if you take Mike Dexter from *Can’t Hardly Wait*, he’s hanging out with Carlisle Cullen. Carlisle Cullen is hanging out with Van Ray from *Fastlane* and that guy is hanging out with Dr. Cooper,” he muses about the diverse group. Who would you be hanging out with in that group? Like, who would you befriend? “I mean, they’re all so different to me... I like Coop from *Nurse Jackie*, just because he’s funny. I always laughed a lot. I like comedy, I don’t often play it. I try to find comedy in things, sometimes, when it’s not even funny, but I think that that’s the way life is. Even in the most dramatic times, there’s comedy.” ML

Follow Peter on IG, Twitter, and Facebook: @PeterFacinelli, and don’t miss *Hour of Lead*, *Countdown*, and *Running with the Devil*.

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Is there any character in film or TV that sticks out, who you really enjoyed portraying?

"That's a hard question because, for me, my litmus test has always been, when I take a job, am I going to be excited on my way to work? It's the only litmus test I know," he laughs. "I can honestly say, every job I've taken, I've been excited for the day's work ahead. As an actor, you can't even control if a movie is any good, all you can do is hope that the director puts together a good movie or hope that he puts your performance together in a coherent way. You can be giving gold as an actor but the director's like, 'Oh, I like these takes over here because the lighting's better' and you're acting terrible in those takes... But I've been acting for 25 years, so I'm always like, *What's next? What's next? What can I do to grow as an artist?* Not just get complacent."

When you have free time, what is your day like?

"I don't get out of bed." He laughs. "Just lay in bed and I just literally surf the internet of nothingness—just jump from one land of nothingness to the next land of nothingness. I can do that for 10 hours and I find that very relaxing, doing nothing. Then, I feel really bad that I literally don't get out of bed all day. Every once in a while, you need one of those days, right?"

What are you watching on TV?

"I don't watch any TV really. I haven't had cable in a year. I got so busy, I didn't end up getting cable. I hate to say this because I'm in the industry of television and film, but it's such a time suck for me and I end up getting addicted to things. I'll watch ten hours of TV because I can't stop. I watched all of *Breaking Bad* in two and a half weeks, all five seasons. I didn't sleep for like two and a half weeks. That's when I knew I had a problem! I was like, I can't ever. People are like, *Game of Thrones!* I'm like, nope. Even today, my girlfriend was like, 'Hey, we should watch *Stranger Things.*' I was like, 'No, I'm not doing it, because I will watch one episode and then I will not leave the house or do anything until I've watched all the episodes.'

I used to play baseball but I never really went to a lot of baseball games to watch baseball. So, I like playing or doing, rather than watching. I actually even stopped watching my own work. A couple of years ago, I stopped feeling the need to watch my stuff. I used to want to watch it all the time, 'cause you want to see how the project came together.... But I didn't stop watching because I couldn't bare watching myself, I just got bored with watching my stuff, because I lived it, so I didn't feel the need to have to watch it—that experience became more satisfying to me than watching the end result. When you're directing, you're watching the movie hundreds and hundreds of times. There's times when you love it and times when you hate it. And there's times where you're like, *This is terrible!* And there's times where you're like, *This is great!* So, it's a weird relationship because you're watching it so many times."

Who is on your playlist?

"I like The Lumineers. I saw them play at the bowl and they were really fun. So, I'd tried to learn guitar before and it was so hard that I just stopped. Then, I picked it up two years ago, I said, 'I'm just going to play this damn thing everyday until I figure it out.' I still haven't quite figured it out." Peter laughs. "You're never going to figure it out fully, but I can play it. I can play almost every one of The Lumineers' songs. I like their music, so it inspired me to play."

I guess that's like any art though. I don't think you ever feel—no matter what art you do—like 100%, oh, I've mastered this thing. Even a great guitarist is probably like, *Hmm, there's probably more I can learn with this instrument.* Y'know? I feel like once you're like, 'Oh, I know how to do that.' Then, you kind of are artistically dead... If I'm not a little nervous before a scene, then I shouldn't be doing this movie, because it means I don't have an excitement for that scene. When people are like, 'Do you get nervous before a scene?' I'm like, 'Yeah, it's great.' I'm happy to get nervous. If I don't get nervous, I'm in trouble. You want to have that slight feeling of discomfort of like, alright, you're about to jump into this cold pool. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm jumping. On three, here we go, 'action,' then, you jump."

Do you have a philosophy in life?

"I have one. There was a guy I met, he was a homeless guy, and I took him out for lunch. He asked me for change and I said, 'I'll buy you lunch.' Brought him into this restaurant, like this [similar to the restaurant we're in], and he was disheveled, he smelled bad. And I sat at the table with him and I would watch how people looked at him, looked down on him. But he was oblivious to it all, he didn't care. At the end, he wrote something for me on a piece of paper, it said: *In this lifetime, nothing is true, nothing is false. It's all how you look at things through your own looking glass.* It was a really beautiful quote. I don't know his name. I never saw him again. To me that meant, you can judge something, I can judge something, but at the end of the day, the only truth is what you're perceiving for yourself. When you look through that looking glass, that's the truth: whatever you're seeing in that mirror and taking in. So, it's for no one else to really judge."

What do you think people would be surprised to find out about you?

"I don't know—that's something you gotta ask somebody else. I don't know what people don't know about me. I find that other people's opinions about me are none of my business and that's how I live my life."

What are your plans for this summer?

"I have a movie in September I'm going to do with Guy Pearce and Ben Kingsley called *Long Gone Heroes*. It's kind of this paid militia group of five guys and this mission that they're on. Not military like U.S. government, like paid militia. I've never dove into that world, so that's fun. I've just been eating whatever I want 'cause this character I'm playing, Keith, is kinda like a schlub, so I gotta go home and start hitting the gym because that requires a different body physique. I'll have a good month off to go on some vacations with my kids, which is nice. Figure out where I want to take them, either Hawaii or somewhere fun. There's another movie in October that I'm considering doing, but I haven't given a final on that. And there's another movie I got offered to direct. I'm trying to fit that in because I'd like to try to direct another one before the year is out."

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