THE EXTRA ORDINARY WORLD OF PETER VACK

To call Peter Vack — a 33 year-old Manhattan native, current Brooklyn-dweller, and evocative actor-filmmaker — a modern day maverick would be a bit of an understatement. I say this, as anyone who has perused and traced his body of work would see a repertoire of eclectic acting credits, both in film and television; an impressive theatrical history on stage; a hugely iconic voice-acting role; and more recently, forays into the world of film direction. All instances bear hallmarks of a polymathic individual showcasing a myriad of talents, and yet there remains a non-conformist, original, even unorthodox quality to Vack's presence in the entertainment industry: evident through his propensity to play Machiavellian, 'douchebag with a heart of gold' characters, and his alternative antics on social media as somewhat of a memelord, on his often NSFW page. Vack's directorial feature debut Assholes (2017) premiered at SXSW to reviews of shock and disgust, bristling at the provocative subject matter and exploration of the darkness of the human psyche, with much emphasis on the eponymous anatomical body part. To try to contain him to one singular domain is near impossible, and it's evident through his philosophical musings and perceptive attitudes to society, that Peter Vack is certainly one to watch.

Through Skype, Vack appears on my screen wearing a plain white t-shirt, his hair grown to a now signature length so that it is long enough to be just tucked behind his ears. He looks like he could be a member of The Strokes — conventionally handsome, with a NYC sensibility, and the right hint of roguish charm. "I've been an actor since I was 7 years-old," he begins. Born in the West Village to culturally-appreciative parents, Vack graduated from the Professional Children's School, and later USC with a theatre degree. In fact, his whole childhood was imbued with theatre: neither of his parents are professional actors, but his father had acted in his early twenties, later transitioning to business, and his mother, who is a psychoanalyst, had been a theatre major while in college. "We grew up listening to show tunes, and there was such a love and appreciation for theatre and the performing arts in my family," Vack recalls. He was first noticed by an agent while playing one of the munchkins in a Wizard of Oz production, but in his words, "fortunately intuited that it wasn't a good atmosphere for a kid". Though he largely avoided significant roles as a child, he frequented musical theatre summer camps. "It always felt like the core of my identity: that I was an actor, even when I wasn't acting professionally, but then I got back into it." Impressively, while most fellow seniors his age were busy cramming for exams and worrying about the imminence of college life, a teenaged Vack had landed the role of the Prince of Wales in a production of Richard III at the Public Theater — the ilk of which also included Peter Dinklage as the iconic title character, and Ron Cephas Jones as the Duke of Clarence. For those unaware, the off-Broadway Public was founded by Joseph Papp in 1954, becoming a revered mainstay for the performing arts community. Thinking about the immensity of such a role amongst a titanic cast is enough to induce anxiety, but this instance gave Peter Vack the opportunity to add an impressive post to his growing résumé, and broaden his network, particularly affording the chance to meet his idol Philip Seymour Hoffman.
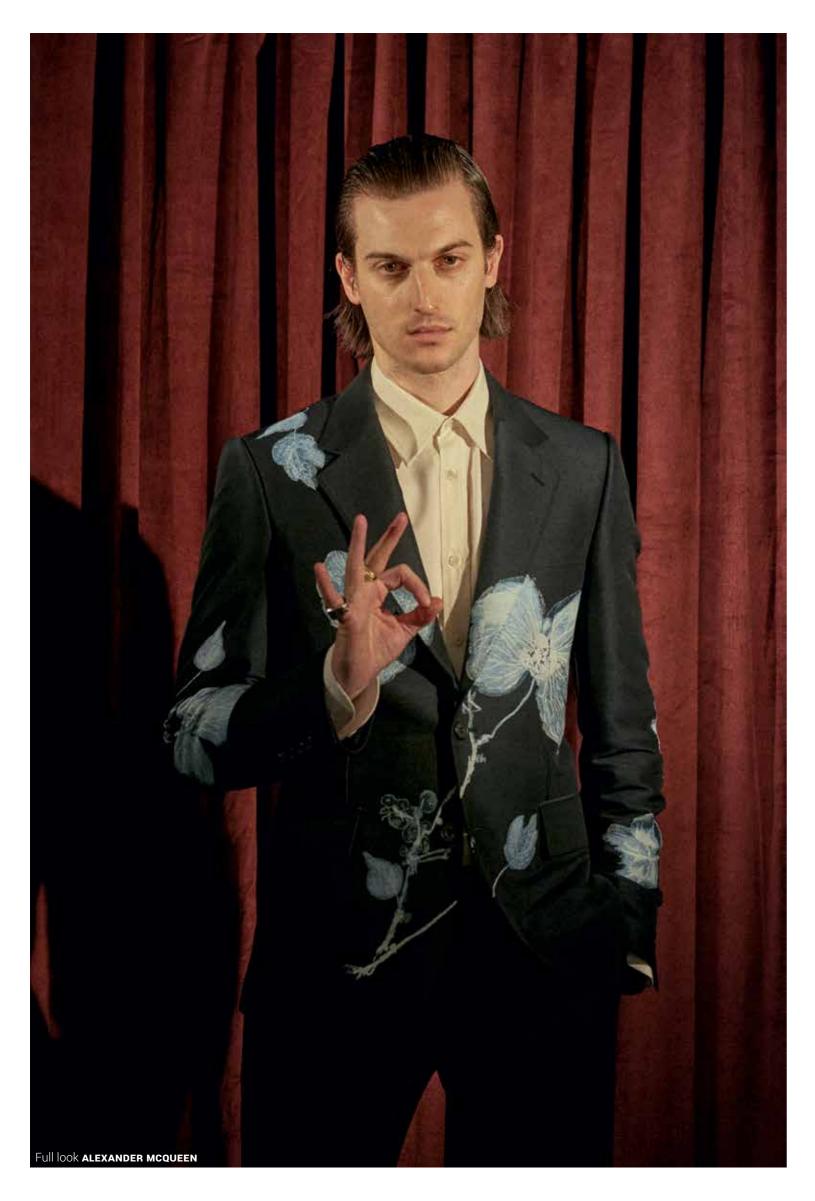
"Ron Cephas Jones, who is an amazing actor and someone who's always been well respected in the New York Theater community, was in the LAByrinth Theater Company with Phil — who was one of the co-founders with John Ortiz," Vack explains. "And I was just like, obsessed with [Hoffman], because he really did what every actor aspires to, which is a full transformation every time." At the mention of Hoffman, he slows down and seems more pensive, choosing his words of admiration conscientiously. "It's something you don't see that much anymore. I actually think that there's been a philosophical move away from transformations; people don't want actors to transform the way that they did. So I wonder sometimes if what Phil did is maybe –" and his voice trails, tapering off to a questioning intonation. "Maybe it will never be a fully lost art. But there are some roles that I wonder if he would have been able to play them, or be cast today," he shrugs. "I remember telling Ron, you know, 'Phil is my idol!', and he said 'Well, you got to just go'. This guy was so sweet to me. I was just a kid, and he was a man in his fifties," Vack relays. Naturally, he followed Jones' advice and attended a reading series at the Public Theater which Hoffman was directing, in order to introduce himself. "I was like 'Oh God, okay!'" he laughs off, recalling his youthful nervousness. "It's one of those things I'll never forget. It was a very brief interaction, but I was in the presence of his greatness — it's a word that you reserve for him. He was the greatest."

For the majority of people who owned a PlayStation 2 in the early aughts, the introduction of Rockstar Game's 2006 release Bully (renamed in other countries as Canis Canem Edit) acted as a segue to the familiarisation of Peter Vack's name. In the open world of Bullworth Academy — a leafy New England boarding school brimming with typical juvenile cliques such as Bullies, Nerds, Preppies, Greasers, and Jocks — the villainous character Gary Smith stood out as the least trustworthy of them all: a sociopathic, double-crossing narcissist with a uniquely snobby voice. It was of course,

Vack, who lent his rangeful, expressive voice the crystalline, leering haughtiness that has cemented Gary's status as an iconic villain. When I bring up the enduring popularity of Bully and the character of Gary, evident through the multiple fan pages that continue to tag Vack on Instagram even today, he chuckles appreciatively. "It's the most famous role that I've played for sure," he says. "The people that love it, really love it. I never could have expected how popular this part would be." After hearing about the tight-lipped casting (not even the client Rockstar was revealed), Vack completed cold readings of sides that were provided in the moments before his audition. "There was something vaguely threatening about the sides. I looked at them for a couple minutes in the waiting room, which is not typical. Usually you have them at least a couple days in advance; you prepare, and you treat it the way you would treat a part. Sometimes, and this was one of those occasions, you have no time to prepare," he recalls assuredly. After just one read through, Vack found out that he had won the part the next day. What followed was a demanding 3-day motion capture process, of which he compares to the culture of theatre. "With film, you have to do a scene over and over again, with the cameras in different angles, which is a very time-consuming process. With motion capture, since they're shooting from all conceivable angles at once, each time you do a take which they like, you move on. I'm not familiar with video games and I'm sure the graphics have gotten much better, but back then the graphics were a little bit more rudimentary," he explains. He's correct — the animation details of Bully appear choppy and clumsy at times, especially when played on modern day consoles and high definition screens. However, this afforded a way to overcompensate in the physicality of the performance: "the only notes they would give us was 'bigger', physicalise it more. And it's pretty fun when as an actor, your direction is to 'overdo it' — it's kind of satisfying." Coupled with the pressing cold that Vack experienced as he recorded his lines for Gary a year later, a epochal villain was born. "When I hear Gary, I think part of what makes him interesting is that he sounds stuffed up sometimes," Vack speculates. That he was actually unwell during recording only adds to the nasal quality of the character's snootiness, but the most surprising thing to learn about Vack here is that he has never actually played Bully, to engage with Gary's antics in action. He smiles sheepishly as he professes, "I have a special place in my heart for the fans of Gary. People love him, and I think I'll never escape it. I'm proud of it. When I have seen the scenes, I've thought it does seem like a cool game. It seems fun and I get why people are into it and the character — it's exciting!"

I switch the subject to his breakout role in 2011, when Vack was cast as the lead of MTV's show I Just Want My Pants Back. There are few actors in mind that could have portrayed the hopeless, gullible character of Jason Strider as charismatically and compellingly as Vack. Pants is a scrappy, playful series set against the backdrop of a youthful Brooklyn, as a bunch of college-aged, 20-somethings navigate the city in pursuit of financial stability, love, sex, and friendships — but the main story focuses on Jason, who after a one-night-stand with an attractive, elusive, and kleptomaniac woman, actually just wants his pants back. The role beckoned towards him. "I think I auditioned for like, six or seven times before I got the offer. It was absolutely the most intense audition process that I've ever had. And I'm not sure that I'll ever have an audition process that intense ever again," he recounts, adding in an anecdote about his auditions in LA with potential actresses; only to share an indisputable chemistry with Kim Shaw during a read, who ended up playing his best friend Tina on the show. "It was this incredible experience, and I think it just gave me even more confidence in what I do," Vack says, and I can't help but perceive a slight tinge of wistfulness as he reminisces on the early days of Pants. The show was axed only after one season, much to the dismay of all involved, and the faithful fan base it had acquired along the way. "It was the most thrilling experience, because you can't ever recreate the feeling of going from someone who's never been a series regular on a programme, to be cast title character. It can only happen once, and it was just a very -," he pauses to find the right words to convey the personal magnitude of the role, "- it was like I had won American Idol or something. For me, in my world and my career, it was great. We loved doing that show so much; the creators Doug Liman, [Dave] Bartis, [David] Rosen, and all the actors were doing their first gig, and we had so much fun. It was very disappointing when we didn't get picked up again. But what I'll say is, in the past couple years, it feels like the people that were actually into that show, some of them are now at the age where they've moved to Brooklyn. You know, I've run into people a handful of times, and someone will go, 'I basically live in Brooklyn, because I loved watching I Just Want My Pants Back'. And that's very gratifying." Vack's smile is contagious, and it beams through as he speaks about the youthful influence of the show. "We take for granted that there's a genre of television — the kind of show that focuses on that milieu of Brooklyn 'hipster' types. But when Pants was on air, it wasn't as commonplace," he comments. He lists comedy-drama series Girls as another example within the televised landscape capturing the insular lives and anxieties of city-dwelling millennials. "When we were in the first season of

Pants, around the same time as the first season of Girls, it really was the beginning of that genre, with those characters being in the TV zeitgeist." And it's incredibly hard not to feel attached to these charismatic characters, with their idiosyncrasies, vulnerabilities and unique challenges that resonate with young audiences. Though Pants is set during the early infancy of the social media explosion (Instagram was founded in 2010, but only reached its cultural linchpin status after it was acquired by Facebook in 2012), it provided a stepping stone into an introspective look at youth culture, and the way social networking has proliferated through the years. A short film called Send, which premiered on Nowness in 2013 was a result of Peter Vack's attempt to find a specific way to "depict social media, or the feeling of social media without shooting actual screens." He says, "At the time that I wrote the script in 2011, there were not that many films focusing on the tensions around social media, and communicating with intimate people online. So now it feels like that's a genre in and of itself. It was very exciting to write, because it felt like unchartered territory." Starring Julia Garner, the short follows a highschooler who believes that her boyfriend has cheated on her over the summer via social media, then proceeds to send out his private dick pic in retaliation, which goes viral. The originality lies in that every interaction with social media platforms sees the actors on stage, in front of an audience, broadcasting to the world. The execution of the cyber short is immaculate; the cinematography crisp, stark, and unyielding. "The seed of the idea was a literal audience, watching someone on stage declare what they're posting. We take so seriously the things that we see online, and we can have such a huge reaction to very minor things, that a lot of it is projection: some of it's real, but a lot of it isn't," Vack offers earnestly. "I was interested in just making a movie that took all that very seriously — that didn't turn it into a joke, or made it ironic — but treated the taboo of a girl seeing something from a person that she's romantically involved with online, to see her interpret or misinterpret it in a way that gives her a lot of pain. That pain drives her to do something that she maybe wouldn't have done otherwise," he surmises. "It's easier to exploit yourself and others when you're not face-to-face."

Our conversation makes an instinctive turn towards Vack's directorial feature-length debut and latest offering: the controversial Assholes released in 2017, which starred his own sister Betsey Brown. Begetting review declarations such as "one of the most disgusting movies ever made", the film explored the darkness of the human psyche and the wildly imaginative ramifications of addiction. When I ask how inspiration for the narrative came about, Vack takes a moment to compose his response. "Assholes began as an exercise looking at some characters that were very unsavoury," he says slowly, and raises his eyebrows archly. "I think I was dealing with a lot of self-hatred at the time, so I would try to work that out through these very unsavoury characters. The main character was very loosely based on my friend Aaron, and my sister wasn't ever initially supposed to play that role. In the earlier drafts, the dynamic was not siblings — it became siblings and then it became more interesting because of that," he laughs. Intriguingly, there is more than meets the eye to this film: the script was completed over a few years in installments with breaks in between, during which Vack had been reading literary criticism about Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust, a play in which the demonic character of Mephistopheles makes an appearance. Asides from the central propelling story of a "lovers-on-the-run", Bonnie and Clyde-esque scenario, what Vack had in mind was a commentary of sorts, "maybe more unconsciously than consciously, about regression and rage in relationships — how easy it is to become your worst self when you're in an intimate situation." He speaks contemplatively, "I was also thinking about addiction and how so many people struggle with feeling compelled towards some compulsive behaviour." And here, he echoes our earlier conversation on the semblance of social media: "there was also the feeling I had at the time that we were all trying to expose ourselves, so focused on the self — again that it feels related to social media. There's this feeling that you're constantly projecting who you are, but you're projecting it almost into a mirror." Vack's words flow animatedly, passionately even. But one still wonders; why the anatomical 'asshole' specifically? What is it about this specific erogenous zone that remains so unexplored in films and art in general? Vack starts to detail his justification for treating the asshole as his point of focus, and his talking speed reaches a full velocity — his train of thought tumbles out into a monologue. "For me, the fetishising of the asshole comes from people on one hand wanting to reveal their most intimate part to the world; which people are doing in a sense, with disclosing all this personal history. People discover that they want to disclose all this material, which up until very recently was just not public, or seen as public. I'm not placing a value or judgement on it actually, I'm just noticing that it's happening - so these characters are taking that to the extreme."

That the central characters of Vack's film are so fixated on the most intimate part of each other's bodies is not too surprising, considering Vack's preoccupation with the role of intimacy and taboos in society. "This was pre-ass-eating memes," he clarifies. I ask him to elucidate. "Suddenly,

ass-eating is the subject of memes. How is this happening? Maybe it's like every generation needs a sexual practice that provokes the older generation," he suggests conspiratorially with a laugh. "But what's next? Millennials did ass-eating, and it's fucking commonplace, and no one gives a shit anymore. It's not provocative or edgy anymore, like great, you eat ass!" with a slightly detectable tone of incredulity. I offer up the latest cohort of Gen Z as a solution, with their now hegemonic status of meme-making, and setting meme trends. "Yeah, Gen Z's really gonna have to one up," Vack smiles. It's true — it would be incredibly difficult to produce content that would be as viscerally repulsive or shocking anymore, with what already circulates online. I admit to Vack that Assholes was visually hard to tolerate, as far as my queasy tolerance would allow. This surprises him. "I thought people were gonna be creeped out by the fact that the director gave his sister a part!" he laughs. I compare the film's shock-factor to the likes of early Internet chain posts of 'Blue Waffle' (Google it); gross, close-up images of STIs and revolting images that were supposed to induce disgust and fascination, sent by friends in school and forwarded on. This was an innocent epoch of just discovering how to use the Internet and testing the waters of forbidden territory. My comparison brings up an 'aha!' moment for Vack and he nods his head in agreement. "Well thank you for saying that, because that is absolutely, whether it was conscious or not, something that was relevant for me too. We had a site called Goatse, and the viral photo was of a guy bending over and spreading his asshole to a Coke can circumference. And he had on a wedding ring," he explains incredulously. Our interview has well and truly moved well beyond polite chatter into unfiltered, no-limits discussion; and it's easy to see how, with Vack's ease in conversation and startling candidness. The man is a born entertainer, keenly observant — and refreshingly, does not take himself too seriously. "It's crazy! The early Internet shocked so many people, and whether I was conscious of it or not, that energy is definitely what I wanted to capture in the movie as well. Rotten.com, Goatse: these are very formative experiences that like terrified you, but they were also very seductive - like you wanted to look at them, but could you? Can I look at this?" he says animatedly. "At a young age, the Internet exposes you to the reality that there's a very deep, dark perverse underbelly to society."

Much of Vack's observance of technology and the supersedence of the Internet has been useful in migrating the art of shock to newer, more native forms of digital platforms; memes for example. As a meme creator (or 'meme admin') for a few years, Vack's account @themasterofcum is satirical, detached, sardonic, and even downright perplexing at times. It's chaotically filled with pixelated stock images, loud colours, clownish fonts, and appropriated cartoons; all hallmark traits within the meme community, which itself is saturated with energy that can only be described as cursed. The memes tap into the apathy of contemporary life, dealing with fears and anxieties with a disconnect so brazen and derisive, they seem almost self-deprecative, or possibly hinting at a lurking, hidden truth. Stumbling upon Vack's account seems like the discovery of a playground or carnival ride — a distractory fix for the jaded of the sorts. But, it works. "It's very cathartic for people to make or receive memes, and what I love about it is that it's such a new medium. It feels like the only fully new medium," he theorizes. Meme-sharing certainly has transformed the regular tools of communication which we use on a daily basis, particularly online. The only drawback is that it is highly addictive; especially for meme creators. "Yeah I can't - I try to stop, but I can't," Vack confesses with a sheepish grin. "There's something so simple about it; it is just an image with text, but the possibilities are endless, and the amount of humour and sometimes wisdom and political conviction that you find in meme culture is astonishing," he continues. "I think it is a good way to not only spread humour, but sometimes spread important ideas — obviously some ideas are abhorrent — but it's a very alive medium, and I don't think we even know what it is." After a small pause, Vack suddenly continues with the intensity of a lightning bolt: "We don't even know how to think about them — I find myself right now having trouble talking about memes because there's not a lot of language to talk about them. The way people interact with them is unlike the way we interact with any other media; it's not like a book, it's not like a movie, it's not like a painting. The way you see it, the way you share it, the way it comes into your life, it's like a new frontier in a way and I love it. I mean, I love language and I love images, and I love the humour of memes." His response is much more earnest and poetic than I had anticipated, and for a moment, I also feel overwhelmingly compelled to start creating memes myself. I also feel amazed at the multifarious eccentricity of it all; from Vack's proven talents in the arts, to his classical attractiveness, his fearlessness at broaching taboo subjects in his work, to the downright NSFW meme-making. And the best part? You certainly can follow Vack's footsteps and create your own memes, using an iPhone app as basic as PicsArt — take it from the trusted man himself.

Full look **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**