

BOROUGH BOY

Actor Chazz Palminteri is far from holy in 'Saints'

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

In the new movie "A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints," opening Friday, actor Chazz Palminteri plays Monty Montiel, a gruff father in Queens who doesn't know how to keep his slightly wild son Dito safe other than to hold him tighter and tighter until he's squeezing the life out of the kid.

"His whole world revolved around his son," says Palminteri about the father depicted in director Dito Montiel's autobiographical tale. "Even though I had a great relationship with my dad, I understood it. I saw fathers like that. Dito's dad is much older than him. People thought he was his grandfather."

Whether Palminteri is facing off against the young Dito (played by Shia LaBeouf) or the adult Dito (Robert Downey Jr.) who has returned home to try and convince his ailing father to go to the hospital, he gives it the same intensity that Palminteri brought to the story of his own life, retold on stage and in film.

"I felt I knew these people, this world," says the 54-year-old New Yorker. "It reminded me of 'A Bronx Tale,'" the play and screenplay Palminteri wrote about his own upbringing. He starred in the 1993 film. "It was like 'A Queens Tale.'"

But people who think they know Palminteri are always being surprised. He followed "Bronx" — a gasp of air after a long time working blue-collar jobs and writing at night to feed his art — with an Academy Award-nominated turn in

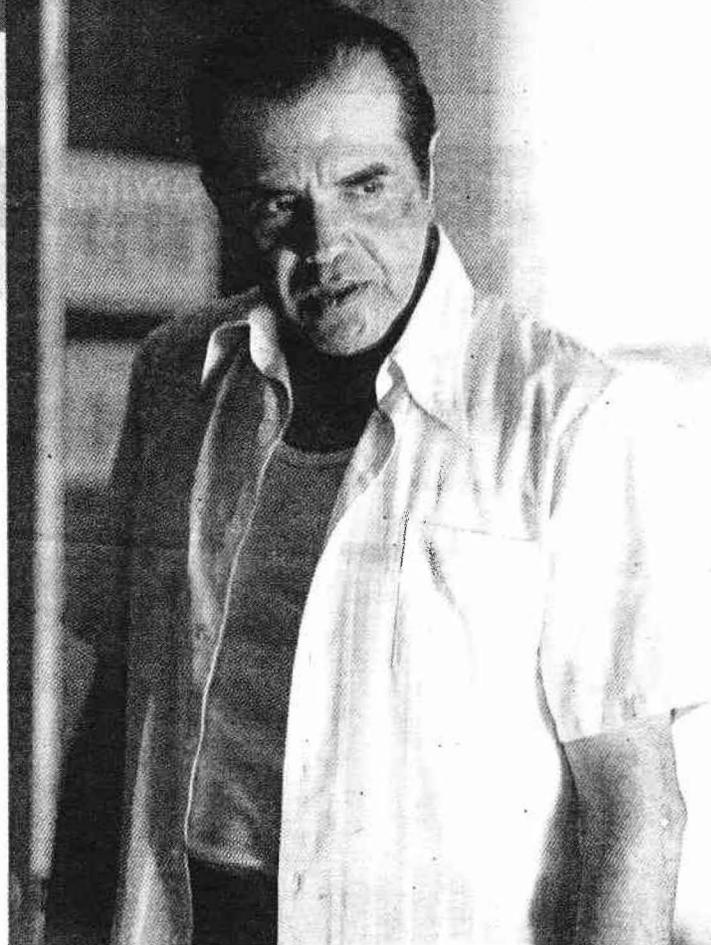
Woody Allen's comedy "Bullets Over Broadway." Since then he has done everything from "The Usual Suspects" to "Analyze This" to "Stuart Little" and the TV series remake of "Kojak" with Ving Rhames.

And while it sounds like a "Saturday Night Live" skit, Palminteri's roots in the cover band Razzamachazz are pulling him back toward music. He has been developing a musical version of "A Bronx Tale" with songwriter Jimmy Webb for several years. An upcoming film — "The Dukes" — involves the members of an aging doo-wop group that was on the top of the world when they were 17. And Palminteri is premiering his new theatrical piece "My Life in Song" at Lorenzo's Cabaret on Staten Island on Oct. 14.

"Music is very important to me," says Palminteri. "This show is very different. It's like 'A Bronx Tale' but done in a very different way. I'll sing songs from all different eras, songs like George Benson's 'On Broadway' and Van Morrison's 'Moondance,' while telling the story of my life."

And until that begins, he'll be helping Montiel tell the story of his life in "Saints."

"I love working with young, first-time directors," says Palminteri. "They're feelers. They'll do anything, try anything. They don't know any better!" ♦



DAD OR ALIVE
Chazz Palminteri
is a tough father
in "A Guide to
Recognizing
Your Saints."

'Recognizing' his dreams

Astoria's Dito Montiel turned a wild childhood into a movie



KEEPING IT REAL Director Dito Montiel (l.) with Robert Downey Jr., who plays him, on location in Queens.

If you made a movie about most people's life, you'd have to spice it up to keep things interesting. For New Yorker Dito Montiel, he had to keep taking things out because no one would believe it.

Montiel was the lead singer of Gutterboy, the self-described "most successful unsuccessful band in the world." (They signed a reported \$1 million deal with Geffen Records and then gleefully imploded on tour.) Then Montiel turned his adventures — growing up in Queens, unwittingly turning away Andy Warhol at the Palladium when he was a doorman, hanging with photographer Bruce Weber and poet Allen Ginsberg — into the rambling, kaleidoscopic memoir called "A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints."

Now the 36-year-old Montiel has turned that book into a movie that focuses on one key summer of his childhood, and his adult return to the neighborhood to confront his ailing father. It stars Chazz Palminteri as Montiel's dad, Dianne Wiest as his mom, Robert Downey Jr. as the adult Dito, Shia LaBeouf as young Dito and Channing Tatum (of the summer hit "Step Up") as Dito's volcanic friend Antonio. It has already won awards for Dramatic Directing and a Special Jury Award for Best Ensemble at Sundance. The movie, opening Friday, has been a homecoming in more ways than one.

"I love Astoria," says Montiel, who just moved back

into the neighborhood with his girlfriend. It was remarkably easy to find a new home, just as it was easy to get the streets to look like the early '80s of his childhood.

"Besides taking out some ATM signs, it's a bit of a timeless place," he continues. "It reminds me of when I was a kid. My friend came out of jail and I walked him around and showed him how everything had changed. He said, 'It looks the same.' Now I've come back and everyone says how it's changed. It looks the same. It's a timeless place to me. I really love it; I always have loved it."

Montiel says he used to call the blocks between 14th St. and 42nd St. in Manhattan "the desert." Now it's filled with Starbucks and Gaps.

"I kind of liked the little shops selling all sorts of deadly weapons and books like 'How to Kill,'" says Montiel. "But I know the weirdness never goes completely away. It just gets pushed around."

As for Montiel, he never planned to be in a rock band or work as a fashion model for Weber and Versace; he never expected to write a book and he certainly never thought about directing a movie. Not surprisingly, he has no plans for a "next move."

"I didn't do any of this to have a career," says Montiel. "This movie came out exactly like I wanted it to. That makes me happy." M.G.