

Robert LaSardo Beats the Odds

BY **JOSE MARTINEZ**

PHOTOGRAPHY **TIM HALE**

GROOMING **ANTHONY MERANTE**

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Robert LaSardo may not be a household name but chances are you've seen his work and you've definitely remembered him. At 5'7" he may not be the most imposing figure but he does demand your attention when he enters a room. Sure, the impressive ink tableau that covers his body is one reason, but his walk and demeanor definitely add to his larger-than-life persona.

Meeting for an afternoon conversation, LaSardo is dressed modestly in jeans, sweater, and jacket, with a beanie covering his head. Few tattoos are even visible, yet if you don't know any better you could be taken aback when you come face-to-face. But the truth of the matter is that Robert LaSardo, however menacing he may appear on the surface, is, in fact, a well-mannered, extremely articulate, amiable individual.

Driven to succeed, LaSardo usually plays the heavy in films and television shows. Who can ever forget his riveting performance in "Nip/Tuck" as Escobar Gallardo? Introduced in the show's pilot episode, concerned about his molested daughter, Escobar later came back and blackmailed the show's plastic surgeons into putting heroin into women's breast implants to aid him in his drug trafficking. And it only got more intense from there.

Currently starring on the daytime drama "General Hospital" as well as opposite Cuba Gooding Jr. and Clifton Collins Jr. in the independent film, *Dirty*, the 42-year-old welcomes daring roles. *Dirty* tells the story of two gang bangers-turned-cops trying to cover up a scandal within the LAPD; LaSardo plays a drug lord who isn't happy when the two crooked cops unwittingly raid his business.

Born in Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn, LaSardo admits he was a "latchkey kid raised watching movies." A fan of Burt Lancaster, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Lana Turner, and Rita Hayworth, the actor confesses, "Movies saved my life."

Raised in a foster home, plagued by trouble and unrest as a kid, LaSardo managed to graduate with honors from the High School of Performing Arts in NYC. He acknowledges that acting "was the closest thing to freedom that I felt because the world I was growing up in was so chaotic. It made me feel good and I felt love that I didn't feel anywhere else. I saw the power of imagination. This was my only escape."

But LaSardo admits he was an angry youth with angry friends looking to vent their aggression. Some of them were locked up, and, he remarks "I was heading in that direction too." Desperate to get away from his surroundings, the young LaSardo longed for guidance and hard line discipline. After getting his first tattoo at the age of 17, he signed up for a four-year stint in the U.S. Navy. For two years he trained attack dogs in the Aleutian Islands followed by two years stationed in San Diego, with stops in Africa, Australia, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia.

More tattoos at various ports followed as did a kinship with the Asian countries he visited. "They would see me differently. I felt more at home there."

Seeing the success of former fellow classmates Helen Slater and Esai Morales convinced LaSardo, following his honorable discharge, to pursue acting. After studying at the Stella Adler Conservatory in New York City, he landed his first film roles in Abel Ferrara's *China Girl* (1987) and *Moving* (1988) starring Richard Pryor. The former wayward-youth-turned-actor was hooked.

"Creativity can release you from the limitations that the world has constructed around you; the everyday, mundane, 9-5 jail cell where everybody is waiting for the weekend to party so they can get outside of their head," he points out.

Films opposite Steven Seagal (*Hard to Kill* and *Out for Justice*), Wesley Snipes (*Drop Zone*), and Kevin Costner (*Waterworld*), as well as for filmmaker Abel Ferrara (*King of New York*) garnered more attention for LaSardo. But it was his work in television ("China Beach," "Murder One," and "NYPD Blue") that really let him shine.

"Creatively, I probably could have been challenged more," LaSardo says about his early days, "but back then it was appropriate. At the time I was just happy and thankful to be a part [of them]. The first time I felt really challenged creatively was when I did "China Beach," when I played a character named Jesus Zappara. He was a good guy, a point man in Vietnam, and that was cool. And then I met Steven Bochco and did the first season of "NYPD Blue" and was taken seriously and not just as a bad dude with a lot of tattoos. Then I developed a relationship with Steven Bochco and he used me a few other times in more episodes of "NYPD Blue," "Philly," "Blind Justice," and "Murder One." Ironically, in TV there was more room for character development and they gave me more [opportunity] to run with the ball, whereas in movies the characters never had a full arc; they were caricatures and not fleshed out."

As more roles followed so did the looks and stares from casting directors every time that tattooed guy would walk into an audition. Thankfully, that didn't last too long.

"Now celebrities have tattoos and it has become more acceptable and isn't as shocking," LaSardo explains. "But I had a few obstacles in front of me because of my tattoos, but in spite of that they still hired me. They even put makeup on me in "NYPD Blue" to cover the tattoos on my neck because they saw that I was able to pull it off. The ink is part of who I am and my personal expression but I have ability. Now people are more and more purchasing identities or creating this look to try to get work, as opposed to coming from the inside out."

"Now I get people who come up to me and say, 'That's beautiful artwork. Can I look at that?'" LaSardo continues, "and I get people who have difficulty with the images; it

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frightens them, especially back when they weren't so popular. People associated them with prison and drugs and gangs. So I've had people say rude things to me, like 'You're never going to be able to make it as an actor,' or 'They're never going to give you a speaking role.' I remember hearing that over and over, and I said, 'Okay,' and just moved forward. One time a mother hid her child from me because she was frightened of the tattooed man, where now they'll say, 'Can I touch your arm or can my daughter look at that?' I see a paragon shift in the collective consciousness. Now [tattoos] seem safer and are more acceptable. And now the collective conventional mindset can be more accepting about someone who has decided to make a choice in expression and can also be a blue-collar worker and not just be a bad guy. Don't get me wrong; I know a good portion of my resumé is a series of destroyers. I am the devil, basically, to some extent.

"What I thought was challenging was dealing with the power structure, the people who were looking at me and were frightened by what they didn't understand. I regret that I had to move through a society that was frightened or hung a label that makes this "bad." The challenge for me was to continually transcend the consciousness of the people around me to where the society itself shifted. Now you see women, models, and

all walks of life, with tattoos. It's becoming a celebrated art form. I was always taught, whether it be with women or work, one hundred 'no's' doesn't mean anything. It's the one 'yes' that counts. It hurt me a little bit to have to constantly hear a lot of negatives but I just trusted that I could not be anything other than who I am. No one put a gun to my head and told me to go to the tattoo parlor. I elected to do it because when I was younger a lot of the dudes I was hanging with were getting tatted down and it was a form of initiation that felt like a family that I never really had. And I love that it's permanent and will never come off because it's the one thing that won't be taken away. So many things are taken away from you and the ink doesn't go away. It stays with you. So how could I deny myself?"

Landing roles as desirable as Escobar in "Nip/Tuck" (which LaSardo describes as "a huge blastoff...the apex that blasted me into a completely different stratosphere") and Roland in *Dirty* only go to prove that perseverance does pay off. Although the affable actor notes he "can't handle the needle as well as I used to but I'm still pretty resilient," he still wants to finish a mural on his back.

Eager for more meaty roles, LaSardo has co-written, produced, and stars in an independent film titled *Never Down*, directed by

co-writer Robert Oppel, also starring Kurt Vonnegut (*Breakfast of Champions*), James Toback (wrote *Bugsy*), and Kamal Ahmed (*The Jerky Boys*). Currently in post production, LaSardo describes the film as a "simple story about a guy named Rico who does five years for armed robbery and wants to reunite with his daughter and have this reclamation and heal."

Never one to let up or quit, the philosophical LaSardo desires to keep acting. "I want to continue to have this love affair with imagination, and as I stay committed to it and give my life to it, my hope is that I evolve and the storytelling evolves and that will lead into places where I can communicate, entertain, inspire, and maybe educate, and show people that don't necessarily fit into conventional structure that they can do it too. Because if I can do it, if I can pull myself out of a pit, then they can too, and I'm not saying it's easy. I've been in this industry 20 years and it took me 20 years to finally get a character on a daytime show that has real development. But there's something in me that has to continually strive to do better. I don't know if I got it from the military, or if it has always been in me, but something in me has to continue to fight to make it better and not let people down who are rooting for me because I know that I am the underdog." ▼

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