

MOVIES

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Kal Penn goes to Hollywood

A star of 'Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle' has a bite of success

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Kal Penn must love the DVD revolution. His 2004 breakthrough movie — the silly but oddly sweet buddy/stoner flick "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle" — was something of a cult fave in theaters but became a monster hit on DVD.

That led to a part in last summer's "Superman Returns," and now the starring role in the

teen comedy "National Lampoon's Van Wilder: The Rise of Taj," opening Friday. He had a role in the 2002 "Van Wilder" — a campus-high-jinks lark — but in the sequel, cool college cutup Taj heads to England for graduate school and befriends a gang of losers who need a boost to their self-confidence.

It was a chance for Penn to headline a film on his own — not to mention unleash his inner Errol Flynn in a goofy fencing finale.

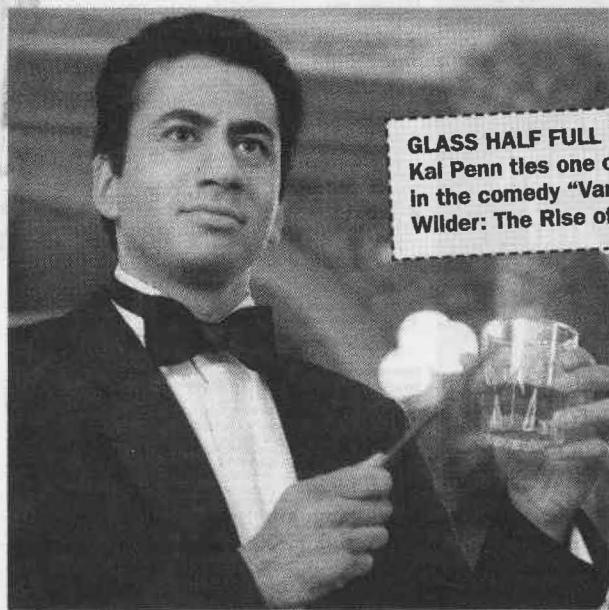
"I learned from the guy who taught Johnny Depp for 'Pirates of the Caribbean,'" says Penn, 29, whose family hails from Mumbai, India, but who grew up in Montclair, N.J. He lived in L.A. for years but now goes back and forth between the coasts.

"It was tough," he says of the fencing.

"It's a physical game of chess — the mental and physical agility that you need. There were a lot of lessons, and then they choreographed. It was difficult, and a good workout."

"There's fencing, and there's also some sword-fighting, which is even more dangerous. It was cool. I definitely felt like kind of a badass."

He also loved playing a henchman for Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) in "Superman Returns." (Penn's hoping the DVD format will be kind to him again and that some of his deleted scenes will be included.) And switching from comedy to a recurring role on TV's "24" when the Fox drama returns in January is the career path Penn was hoping for, even if he's in the dark about what's going to happen to his character on the show.



GLASS HALF FULL
Kal Penn ties one on in the comedy "Van Wilder: The Rise of Taj."

A Jersey guy
graduates from
comedy to
'Wilder' roles.

"They don't tell you anything," says Penn, who can sometimes fall into the "Dude!"-like patter of his "Harold & Kumar" character. "They give you the one script for the episode that you're shooting. ... If you're not on for the next two weeks, they don't give you those scripts, so you have no idea what happened in the meantime. I don't know if I'm a good guy or a bad guy! I don't know how many episodes I'm going to be in! I don't know if I'm going to live or die."

Kumar will certainly live, as the sequel to "Harold & Kumar" starts filming in 2007. The next year will also see him in "Epic Movie," a spoof of blockbusters à la "Scary Movie," due in January. And in spring comes "The Namesake" from director Mira Nair ("Vanity Fair," "Monsoon Wedding"), which has been receiving good reviews at film festivals. It's a project Penn has been on top of for a while — and which, yes, DVD helped him get.

"The Namesake" is one of my favorite books," he says. "I really identified with the lead character. I really wanted to play the part, and I was really aggressive in getting an appointment to see Mira. I had been calling and having my manager call."

"Then it turns out that her teenage son Zohran and his best friend, Sam, are huge 'Harold & Kumar' fans. They grabbed her, dragged her to a computer and said, 'You need to watch Kal, he's in our favorite movie, you have to audition him!'"

"And every night Zohran would say, 'Mom, did you get a hold of Kal yet?' So if it were not for those two guys, I would not have gotten that movie." ♦