FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF *THE FIFTY-YEAR MISSION*

THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE KILLED HIS DOG

THE COMPLETE **UNCENSORED** **ASS-KICKING** ORAL HISTORY OF **JOHN WICK**, **GUN FU**, AND THE NEW AGE OF ACTION

EDWARD GROSS
AND
MARK A. ALTMAN

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DEDICATIONS

From MARK A. ALTMAN

To my wife, **Naomi**, and my kids, **Ella and Isaac,** who are *definitely* not getting a dog now.

Our editor, **Michael Homler,** who lit the Wick by first suggesting this book to us.

My coauthor, **Edward Gross,** who can write an entire book with a pencil and not even break a sweat.

To the East Coast Altmans—**Ira, Becky, Tyler, and Emily**—because it's a small world after all.

To the late *Cinefantastique* magazine founder and editor, **Frederick S. Clarke,** who gave a young college student a break a long time ago to write about what he loved, and I've never stopped since.

To my dad, **Michael**, for introducing me to great action movies way back when with *The Magnificent Seven*. I said clap your hands …

And to my mom, **Gail**, who gets favored nations with my Dad … or I'll never hear the end of it.

From EDWARD GROSS

To my wife, **Eileen**, who, at nearly thirty-five years of marriage, continues to touch my heart in more ways than she could ever imagine.

Our sons, **Teddy**, **Dennis**, and **Kevin**, and daughters-in-law, **Lindsay**, **Yumi**, and **Nicole**, who know what I can do with a pencil (though I prefer a keyboard).

My coauthor, **Mark A. Altman**—you gotta figure turning out seven oral history books in six years means there's a little John Wick in both of

us.

Our editor, **Michael Homler**, who answered the question of what he was looking for with two words, the results of which you're holding in your hand.

And **Clifford**, a wonderful mutt who would have been worth going to war over, too.

EVERYBODY WAS GUN FU FIGHTING

"Nothing's ever just a conversation with you, John."

by Mark A. Altman

I was talking to a friend of mine who works at Lionsgate, who had always been wonderfully generous about sending me tickets for the studio's star-studded premieres, from *The Hunger Games* to *The Expendables* to *Knives Out* over the years, regarding an upcoming movie he was particularly enthused about. Knowing he always had impeccable taste, my interest was immediately piqued. "What's the movie?" I breathlessly inquired.

The answer: "*John Wick.*"

"*John Wick?*" I replied, deflated. I had no idea what it was, nor did it sound particularly promising. *John Wick?!?* It sounded as potentially exciting as a remake of *Patch Adams.* What the hell was a *John Wick*? I think my friend could sense my palpable disappointment as he told me to check my email. I opened my inbox and realized he had sent me the trailer for the film to take a look at. I told him I'd watch it when I had a chance, but he wasn't going to wait. He wanted me to watch the trailer right then and there. "You'd dig it the most," he suggested. So I hit Play and was immediately ushered into the world of the Baba Yaga, the Boogeyman … John Wick. And this was definitely no Patch Adams.

By the time the trailer was over, I knew this was a special film. A combination of the chopsocky and gun fu I had fallen in love with after moving from New York to Los Angeles after college, where I would spend my days at theaters like the Nuart, the New Beverly, the Egyptian, and the Sunset 5 while spinning LaserDiscs of such films as the Criterion Collection's *Hard Boiled* and *The Killer.* I had a huge grin on my face—and even long before the benefit of Zoom, my friend knew it. "*That's* John

Wick," he replied with utter self-assurance, knowing that they'd sold the first of what would be many movie tickets to come.

Long before I fell in love with films like *Enter the Dragon* and later films like *The Heroic Trio*, *Ong-Bak*, *Bullet in the Head*, and *The Raid*, *Hong Kong Phooey*—Number One Super Guy!—was my somewhat elementary (and arguably culturally appropriated) introduction to kung fu, followed by Roger Moore's James Bond capitalizing on the kung fu craze of the seventies in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, the first *Bond* movie I ever saw in a theater. (Thanks, Mom and Dad!) But it wasn't until the dawn of the home video era and the eighties when action movies first caught my interest in a big way.

Although never a fan of the Reagan-era, testosterone-infused right-wing masturbation fantasies of *Rambo* (albeit *First Blood was* a great film before the franchise became as big a fantasy epic as the *Lord of the Rings*) and *Red Heat*, movies like *Lethal Weapon 1* and *2* ("diplomatic immunity"), *Commando*, and *Die Hard*, which blew me through the back wall of the theater, were more up my alley. And one of the reasons I think I fell so hard for *John Wick* when it was released was its neo-noir-infused cinematography and a reluctant hero who is drawn back to his old life after suffering unimaginable loss. He's not a cipher but a fully drawn human being who can kick major ass and was a throwback to the iconic soft-spoken heroes of classic Westerns with a code—like *Shane* or Randolph Scott in the Ranown Westerns, like *Ride Lonesome*, *The Tall T*, and *Seven Men from Now*, or Gary Cooper in *High Noon*—as well as film noir antiheroes with a dark and tragic past like Alain Delon's Jef Costello in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* or Lee Marvin in John Boorman's *Point Blank* presented in a candy-colored wrapper filled with hyperkinetic action scenes, an Oz-like phantasmagoric New York City shot through the lenses of what seemed like a modern-day John Alton (watch *The Big Combo* or *T-Men* and you'll see what I mean), and a dense and well-conceived, ever-metastasizing mythology.

That's why when our jocular editor, Michael Homler, came to Ed Gross and me and asked if we were interested in writing an oral history about John Wick, gun fu, and the new age of action, Ed and I jumped at the chance. And despite going through a lot of lead writing this book, I can

safely say none of our pencils ended up in anyone's aorta—at least that I know of. You'd have to ask Ed.

Finally, one last story that I love that I couldn't fit into the book but seems apropos given that it captures the nexus of the Hollywood dream factory and reality in Los Angeles. Back in the late 1980s, when ex-president (and *Bedtime for Bonzo* star) Ronald Reagan was moving into Fox Plaza in Century City, his Secret Service agents were briefly flummoxed when they discovered tons of spent shell casings in and around the offices that Reagan and his staff were to soon occupy. Their grave concerns soon evaporated to amusement when they realized, of course, that Fox Plaza had been the stand-in for Nakatomi Plaza, and the shell casings were only leftovers from a band of German terrorists and a lone cowboy, police officer John McClane. And no, I didn't read that in *Time* magazine. True story.

So yippee-ki-yay, motherf#%@s, time to lock and load …

Mark A. Altman
August 2021

SYMPATHY FOR MR. VENGEANCE

“No wife, no dog, no home. You have nothing, John. Vengeance is all you have left.”

by Edward Gross

You could count me in as one of the most excited members of the audience as the conclusion of *Avengers: Endgame* played out back in 2019, with heroes “blipped” out of existence suddenly returning and instantly joining ranks with those who had remained behind to combat the tyranny of the mad titan, Thanos, and his army. All told, one of the great moments in movie history which played out as though a comic book had exploded to life in our collective minds and played out in ways we never could have imagined even in our most dream-filled days. Yet, with all of that—and the accompanying screaming and applause that greeted its every spectacle-filled moment—it still wasn’t the most visceral movie moment I’ve ever experienced. Not by a long shot.

For as long as I’ve been going to movies (and I’ve seen a lot of them over the past half-century or so), and for as easily as I’ve been swept up in spectacle, at the same time I’ve held firm in my belief that all the effects in the world cannot compare to a well-choreographed and edited fight sequence between two people who are beating the living shit out of each other, using anything at their disposal to get the job done. Consider the sequence from the second James Bond movie, 1963’s *From Russia with Love*, in which Sean Connery’s 007 and Robert Shaw’s Red Grant explode into violent action against each other in a tiny compartment on the Orient Express.

Join me as I jump ahead to June 1979. I’m sitting in a crowded theater in East Hampton, New York, watching *Rocky II* for the first time. Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa is in the ring for a rematch with Carl Weathers’s

Apollo Creed. Brutal round after brutal round culminates with both boxers hitting the canvas, the one getting to their feet first to be named heavyweight champion of the world. Let me tell you, that theater was filled with people (my nineteen-year-old self included) on their feet, screaming the words “Get up! Get up!” as though we were attending a real boxing match and Rocky would find his renewed vigor by our shouted words of encouragement to get back up on his feet rather than it just being Hollywood doing its thing.

Now you can write this off as being symbolic of a more innocent time, but the reality is that that combination of choreography and editing—and it didn’t matter that in reality no fight has ever seen that many blows thrown over the course of 12 rounds—was responsible for bringing the audience to the state it was in.

Moving along to 1987, it’s the introduction of cops Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) in Richard Donner’s *Lethal Weapon*, which brought a whole new energy level to the action genre as the two of them—despite Riggs’s suicidal tendencies (or maybe because of them?)—take on a drug cartel. The following year, it was Bruce Willis as cop John McClane, finding himself going up against the invading forces of Nakatomi Plaza in *Die Hard* and some of the sloppiest, most street-level fights you’ve ever seen, which, combined with *Lethal Weapon*, marked a fork in the road in the action film.

And it’s only gone on from there with genre films produced in America, Hong Kong, North Korea, and elsewhere, all influencing each other, frequently distilling their best elements and adding new ones, ultimately culminating in the conception and arrival of *John Wick* in 2014. The truth is, nothing could have prepared us for this melding of actor Keanu Reeves and assassin John Wick, which instantly elevated action films to a whole new level and, in turn, triggered a wave of followers attempting to capture that particular brand of magic.

But watching the first three chapters in Wicks’s journey—and the brutal gun fu and fisticuffs that are such an important part of them—and shockingly seeing how much of Reeves himself is an integral part of those action sequences and that there is little in the way of stuntmen seen, has proven itself to be the proverbial breath of fresh air to a genre that’s as old as cinema itself and renewed my own passion for the action film. In a sense,

they’ve brought me right back to being a kid, watching Bond and Grant duking it out on the Orient Express, anticipation growing for what the next fight will be and who will throw the first—and last—punch.

Edward Gross
October 2021

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

“John Wick. The man. The myth. The legend. You’re not very good at retiring.”

JAMES CHAPMAN is a professor of film studies at the University of Leicester, UK. He is the author of *Hitchcock and the Spy Film*, in addition to a number of books on film and cultural history, and is editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television.*

JASON CONSTANTINE is the president of coproductions and acquisitions at Lionsgate, best known for his work on *The Expendables* film series with Sylvester Stallone, horror franchises like *Saw,* and the *John Wick* franchise.

DANIEL CRAIG is a British actor, best known for the portrayal of James Bond as well as his lead role in the successful *Knives Out* mystery film series.

MARK DACASCOS is an actor and martial artist who rose to prominence with his 1993 film, *Only the Strong*, which would go on to influence a generation of martial arts films. He portrayed the role of John Wick antagonist Zero in the 2017 film *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum.*

WILLEM DAFOE is an Oscar-nominated actor best known for roles in *To Live and Die in LA, Streets of Fire,* the Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* films, *Inside Man,* and Paul Schrader’s *The Card Counter.* He portrayed the role of Marcus in *John Wick.*

STEVEN E. DE **SOUZA** is a screenwriter best known for his work defining the eighties action genre with films such as *Die Hard, 48 Hours, Die Hard*

2, and *Commando.*

RICHARD DONNER was a director and producer for film and television. Early success came in television from directing the landmark episode of *The Twilight Zone* "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" before he transitioned to directing motion pictures with such classics as *The Omen*, *Superman*, *The Goonies, Ladyhawke,* and all four *Lethal Weapon* movies. His later years would be spent producing features along with his wife, Lauren, before his death in 2021.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO is a trainer and stunt coordinator for films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, DCEU, and other genre franchises. He was the fight coordinator for *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2* and stunt coordinator for *John Wick: Chapter 3.*

LAURENCE FISHBURNE is an actor best known for such films and television as *Apocalypse Now, Deep Cover, The Matrix, Mystic River, Hannibal,* and *Black-ish.* He portrays the "Bowery King" in the *John Wick* films.

LISA FUNNELL is a professor, award-winning author, and leading expert on gender, feminism, and geopolitics in James Bond and other action films. She is currently working as an associate professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma.

MIKE HOSTENCH is an expert on Hong Kong cinema and has been the deputy director of the Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival of Catalonia since 1992.

PETER HUNT was a fixture in the British film scene during the 1940s and '50s, before securing a regular role as an editor for the James Bond franchise, notably on *Dr. No, From Russia with Love,* and *Goldfinger,* and then becoming a director on the series with *On Her Majesty's Secret Service.*

BASIL IWANYK is a film producer of the *John Wick* franchise. His early work as an executive at Warner Bros. led to producing such films as the remake of *Clash of the Titans* and *The Town*, before starting his own production company, Thunder Road Films, in 2011, whose films also include *The Expendables, Sicario, Greenland,* and *Brooklyn's Finest.*

ANTONY JOHNSTON is a British writer of comic books, video games, and novels, which include his graphic novel *The Coldest City,* adapted as *Atomic Blonde* for actress Charlize Theron.

DEREK KOLSTAD is a screenwriter for the John Wick films, as well as the action film *Nobody, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,* and the upcoming TV adaptation of the video game series *Splinter Cell.*

DAN LAUSTSEN is an Oscar-nominated cinematographer for such films as the Academy Award–winning *The Shape of Water* and *Crimson Peak*, and was the director of photography for *John Wick: Chapter 2*, *Chapter 3*, and *Chapter 4.*

J. F. LAWTON is a screenwriter for the Steven Seagal action film *Under Siege* and the Keanu Reeves sci-fi/action film *Chain Reaction.*

DAVID LEITCH began in Hollywood as a stunt performer for such films as *Fight Club* and the *Matrix* sequels, before becoming the codirector of *John Wick* along with fellow former stunt performer Chad Stahelski. After *John Wick,* he quickly became a Hollywood A-list director with solo directing efforts on *Deadpool 2, Atomic Blonde,* and Sony's *Bullet Train,* starring Brad Pitt.

RICHARD MAIBAUM was an American playwright and screenwriter in the United States best known for his screenplays for the James Bond franchise from 1962 to 1989.

TOM MANKIEWICZ was an American screenwriter, director, and producer of motion pictures and television whose credits included

numerous entries in the James Bond franchise and uncredited work on the Richard Donner *Superman* films, as well as creator of TV's *Hart to Hart.*

JOHN McTIERNAN is a film director best known for his work in the eighties action genre with films like *Die Hard*, *The Last Action Hero*, *The Hunt for Red October,* and the first *Predator* movie, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

RIC MEYERS is an author and teacher, best known for his work in the martial arts genre and for work adapting film and television series like *Dirty Harry* and *The Incredible Hulk* to novel form. He is the author of *Films of Fury: The Kung Fu Movie Book* and its corresponding documentary, *Films of Fury: The Kung Fu Movie Movie.*

HEIDI MONEYMAKER is a stunt performer and coordinator known for her work in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3.*

RAY MORTON is an author, journalist, film historian, and senior writer for *Script* magazine.

PHIL NOBILE JR. is a journalist, former columnist for *Birth.Movies.Death.,* and current editor in chief for the new *Fangoria* magazine.

HARVEY O'BRIEN is a lecturer in film studies at University College Dublin. He has published on such topics as Irish studies, history and the media, horror, science fiction, and documentary films, and is the author of *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back.*

GLEN OLIVER is a journalist, film historian, and pop culture commentator. He spent five years as a senior editor for IGN and nine years as an editor for Ain't It Cool News.

ADRIANNE PALICKI is an actress best known for her breakout role in the landmark series *Friday Night Lights,* as well as ABC's *Agents of Shield.* She appeared as Ms. Perkins in the first *John Wick* film.

J. J. PERRY is a stunt performer and martial artist known for his work in the *Avatar, Fast & Furious,* and *Star Trek* film series and served as a stunt performer on *John Wick* and supervising stunt coordinator on *John Wick: Chapter 2.*

KEANU REEVES is a motion picture actor, best known for his roles in *Dangerous Liaisons, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, Speed, The Matrix,* and for his role of John Wick in the *John Wick* franchise.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR is an Icelandic film editor, known for her work in *John Wick, Deadpool 2, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings,* and *Atomic Blonde.*

STEVEN JAY RUBIN is the author of nine books, including *The Twilight Zone Encyclopedia, Combat Films: American Realism, Secrets of the Great Science Fiction Films,* and *The James Bond Movie Encyclopedia.*

EVAN SCHIFF is a film editor known for *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3* and *Birds of Prey.*

JONATHAN SELA is a cinematographer known for his work on *John Wick, Atomic Blonde,* and *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw.*

BOB SIMMONS was a stunt arranger/stunt double for numerous films in the James Bond franchise from 1962 to 1985.

STANLEY SOPEL was a British film producer for many of the early James Bond films, beginning with *Dr. No* in 1962 and ending with *Diamonds Are Forever* in 1971.

JACKSON SPIDELL is a stunt performer and fight choreographer known for his work in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the *Hunger Games* film series. He served as a stunt double for Keanu Reeves in the *John Wick* franchise.

CHAD STAHELSKI started in film as a stunt performer, serving as Keanu Reeves's stunt double in the *Matrix* films. After twenty-five years, he and David Leitch made the leap to directing with the first *John Wick* film. Stahelski stayed with the *John Wick* franchise, directing *Chapter 2, Chapter 3,* and *Chapter 4*, and is currently slated to direct a reboot of *Highlander* and the adaptation of the hit video game *Ghost of Tsushima.*

JAMES STRATTON is an educator, film scholar, and the author of *Hitchcock's North by Northwest: The Man Who Had Too Much, A Star Is Born & Born Again: Variations on a Hollywood Archetype*, and *100 Guilty Pleasure Movies.*

LARRY TAYLOR is the author of *John McTiernan: The Rise and Fall of an Action Movie Icon* and *Tony Scott: A Filmmaker on Fire.*

CHARLIZE THERON is an actor and producer, known for her roles in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the *Fast & Furious* franchise, *The Old Guard*, and as Lorraine in *Atomic Blonde.* She won an Academy Award for Best Actress in 2003 for the Patty Jenkins film *Monster.*

RODERICK THORP was the bestselling author of *The Detective*, which was made into a film starring Frank Sinatra, and *Nothing Lasts Forever*, which served as the basis of *Die Hard.* Thorp worked as a private detective for nine years and did extensive crime reporting, including a twenty-one-part series on cocaine traffic in Southern California, which was published in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner.*

AUSTIN TRUNICK is a Connecticut-based author and film historian. He serves as the cinema editor for the nationally distributed magazine *Under*

the Radar and is the author of *The Cannon Film Guide: Volume I, 1980–1984.*

BRUCE WILLIS is an actor whose breakthrough role in the television series *Moonlighting* led to him being cast as John McClane in the first *Die Hard* film, catapulting him to megastardom. He is also known for roles in *Pulp Fiction, The Sixth Sense,* and *Sin City.*

TERENCE YOUNG was a British film director for numerous entries in the early James Bond franchise, including *Dr. No, From Russia with Love,* and *Thunderball.*

1 ACTION JACKSON

“You want a war, or do you want to just give me a gun?”

EIGHT YEARS AGO …

When the original John Wick *knocked audiences on their collective asses back in 2014, they really had no idea of the Sturm und Drang it had taken to bring the ambitious action film to life* or *the intricate planning for the elaborate stunt work, balletic gunplay, slick noir-infused aesthetic, and kinetic editing. Despite all the challenges that stood in the way of its box-office success and all the elements that would eventually converge to distinguish* John Wick *as the defining action film franchise of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the first week of filming had virtually no action to speak of, though it did deal with an issue that would have far larger reverberations on the fledgling franchise than anybody could have ever imagined.*

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

We shot about four or five days in John Wick’s house. We probably should’ve shot only about two days in that house, but we shot *a lot.* When you’re starting out on a movie and everyone’s like, “Oh shit, this movie’s not going to work,” and your first week of footage is Keanu brooding in his pajamas around a house, getting a dog, and pouring coffee and looking longingly out a window, you’re like, “Is someone going to shoot somebody? What’s going on here?”

The first action scene in the movie, people come in and try to kill [John], and he kills the people that are in the house. It’s the first attack. I was like, “Holy shit, this is incredibly cool! The somersault and this and

that. Damn, this is fucking unbelievably cool." And I remember that night we had the cop coming to the front door. It was played so straight and played so tonally perfect, I'm like, "These guys get it. They don't just get the action but they get the joke. We're making something absurd, and we're leaning into it." They didn't just go, "Okay, we're making fucking *Gone with the Wind*. We're making a fun, insane graphic novel that's self-referential." And that's when I knew that they had figured out the tone. Because the thing about directors and movies in general is that the tone is the hardest thing to hit. Tone is the end result of so many little and big decisions. Then, when you see it laid out, you're kind of like, "What???" Or, "I hope it gets better in post." This time, between that action sequence, which was so badass, and then him talking to the cop, that was when I was like, "Okay, this *is* going to work."

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

The story's structure is really clever. If the film didn't open the way it did—with a bloody and battered John pulling up to the vet's office in the battered car, which tips us off that we're watching a thriller or an action picture—for the first twenty minutes, we would have thought this was just a drama about a grieving man coping with the death of his beloved wife. After things take a darker turn when the Russian creeps he meets at the gas station invade his home, kill his dog, and steal his car, we might have still assumed we're watching a standard drama—perhaps about rising crime in the suburbs. But then Aurelio recognizes John's car, and Viggo tells Iosef who Wick is. At that point, we would have realized this may not be a standard drama after all. And then when Wick wipes out the team of assassins sent to kill him, we would have known for sure we were not watching a standard drama. But even though the opening scene has already told us this is going to be a thriller or an action film, nothing prepares us for the Continental.

Once Wick passes through its doors, we realize that the movie has just left our reality and has entered an alternate universe where anything can happen. From that moment on, we have no idea where this movie is going to go, so just hang on tight and wait to see where it takes us. All of this

works so well that I kind of wish they cut the opening scene, because then the movie would have been even more surprising than it already is.

BASIL IWANYK

My theory was there are so many action movies, and the premise is really familiar: “Oh, you killed my wife,” which we’ve seen about a million times. “You’ve killed my brother, you’ve killed my dad.” Or it’s something kind of exotic. “I was a Navy SEAL in Afghanistan, and I got betrayed.” Or, “I was a cop, and I was a DEA agent, and you killed my partner.” Something that 98 percent of the audience really doesn’t know how to understand it. And movies labor to evoke emotion. I thought to myself, *Oh my God, what if someone killed my dog and stole my car?* I didn’t go to the dog part. I always went to the idea of the wife’s dying, leaves the dog to the husband, and says, “You need to keep loving in your life, start with this.” That was the element, that was the memory of his wife, and then that’s killed. To me, anyone could understand *that.* Anyone could emotionally empathize with it. It’s so tactile and down to earth. People who wouldn’t ordinarily watch an action movie would go, “Oh my God, don’t mess with my dog. I’d go off.” And we got a lot of that. It was the clear love of Keanu and what he pulled off with his wife and his dog and his despair—the audiences loved it, and they put themselves into it.

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3)*

I struggled a little bit with the dog, because you both wanted it to be the dog, but also it’s the symbolism of the dog, but also it’s the excuse of the dog. It’s those three things. When we initially met with directors, there were a lot of directors who loved the script, but were like, “No, it can’t be the dog; it has to be his whole family.” And to us, it’s like, “You’re kind of missing the point.” That’s not even the dog lover in me, it’s like, “No, it’s not just the dog, but it’s the dog.” We struggled with the dog for the longest time. Even in postproduction, like, is it enough? It wasn’t until the first screening, where we watched the audience watch it, that we were like, “Nope, it’s the dog. It’s just the dog. And we love the dog, and every motherfucker who killed the dog should die.”

* * *

118 YEARS EARLIER …

What could be the first major action scene committed to celluloid arrived in 1896 in the form of the film L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat, *known famously in English as* Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat. *This fifty-second-long silent effort was created by Auguste and Louis Lumière, the pioneering French brothers who helped give birth to what we know as moving pictures. Seven years later, in 1903,* The Great Train Robbery *was made by Edwin S. Porter for the Edison Manufacturing Company. In the film, a band of outlaws rob a steam locomotive, flee across mountainous terrain, and are finally defeated by a posse of locals. In a story that could very well be apocryphal, the action of the film's train robbery and subsequent gunplay coming directly at the screen was enough to so terrify audiences that had never before seen a movie and send them fleeing into the streets outside the cinema.*

The Great Train Robbery *ushered in the audience's fascination and obsession with action movies. From the early cliffhanger serials of the thirties and forties to the spy adventures of the sixties like the James Bond, Matt Helm, Derek Flint, and Harry Palmer films, to such gritty crime thrillers like* The French Connection *and kung fu epics of the seventies like* Enter the Dragon, *muscular, high-octane, testosterone-fueled smackdowns of the eighties like* Predator *and* Rambo, *and the new age of action in the nineties with the dawn of Hong Kong cinema and the Wachowskis'* The Matrix, *they simply couldn't get enough action on the silver screen.*

And there have been myriad iconic cinematic moments in the genre over the decades, from the introduction of James Bond, the only gentleman agent with a license to kill … and thrill … in 1962's Dr. No, *as well as Clint Eastwood's iconic Man with No Name in the spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone, to the arrival of archeologist-cum-adventurer Indiana Jones in 1981's* Raiders of the Lost Ark, *Arnold Schwarzenegger vowing "I'll be back" in 1984's* The Terminator, *John McClane yippee-ki-yaying his way through Nakatomi Plaza in 1988's* Die Hard, *and Jason Bourne fast-cutting to fame in 2002's* The Bourne Identity. *But nothing has come close to matching the balletic gun fu of the revolutionary* John Wick *film series.*

Arriving on the scene in 2014 as portrayed by Keanu Reeves, in less than a decade John Wick has kicked, shot, hacked, and pencil-stabbed his way to the top of Hollywood's action heroes. Driven by revenge and regret, Reeves's "Baba Yaga" has enshrined itself as one of the most iconic characters and action performances in cinema history.

RIC MEYERS
(author, *Films of Fury: The Kung Fu Movie Book*)

I don't consider the train movies as the first action movies, because they were about novelty rather than the action scenes themselves. But there are so many silent films of the early 1900s that have been lost and so many I haven't seen that I can't actually be sure that there *wasn't* at least one balls-to-the-wall nonstop action short amongst them. But because Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton didn't really hit their action stride until 1917, and Douglas Fairbanks really didn't hit his action stride until 1920, I'm going to have to go with Pearl White and *The Perils of Pauline* in 1914 (as well as her imitators). Those were not about the novelty of moving pictures. Those were all about action!

★ ★ ★

It was also the beginning of the action movie cliché: the helpless dame in distress tied to the railroad tracks and in desperate need of rescuing. With the advent of the twenty-first century that trope has been largely eschewed in favor of kick-ass, resourceful female protagonists like Rey in the Star Wars *sequels, Captain Marvel, and Charlize Theron's world-weary but relentless Lorraine Broughton in* Atomic Blonde. *Even in 1999's* The Matrix, *Carrie-Anne Moss's Trinity was an action heroine who could give as good as she got.*

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

It's kind of weird, but it almost feels like it goes full circle. If you look at, like, old Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton movies, they're doing mostly all their own action. I grew up on Hong Kong movies, so I grew up

watching Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung—all those guys in Hong Kong. So you're looking at guys who are doing long takes and long performances in camera. Same thing if you look at the MGM musicals and things like that. Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly—all those guys—are doing long takes of physical action. So I just think everything came full circle again. Now, when you started getting into, say, *The Matrix* and *The Bourne Identity,* you're starting to see A-list kind of Hollywood actors doing Hong Kong–style action, which to me, man, they're just doing all the fight scenes. They're doing long takes and training to do everything like Jackie and all those guys were doing in the eighties. Prior to that, it's Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and those guys in the twenties to thirties, thirties to forties. You look at what Jackie did, and it's the same as Buster Keaton, who was hanging from a clock high above the ground.

GLEN OLIVER
(film historian)

To properly assess the deployment and consequences of action in film, one has to make an almost silly existential assessment of what action really is. Action is not just a mechanism to accomplish *x* on-screen. It's an innate, essential component to our very existence. The first narrative film arrived in the second half of the 1890s. By 1903, we had *The Great Train Robbery,* widely regarded as the first "action" movie. Meaning it took less than a decade for the action film genre to begin forming. There's a reason for that: I'd suggest that it's because humanity has always been determined by action and inaction, thus it has always been instinctively drawn to action through various avenues. It feels purposeful, involving. Natural, in a way. As soon as opportunities come to deploy that familiarity into a new medium, it happens without hesitation.

RIC MEYERS

It all started with *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, which culminated with the iconic shot of a cowboy shooting a six-gun directly at the audience. From there, action films were carried on the strong shoulders of Westerns, comedies, and swashbucklers. Silent-screen gunslingers like William S. Hart and Tom Mix brought law and order to the Wild West; Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd (and many others) did astonishing

acrobatics to get laughs; and Douglas Fairbanks flew, fought, and performed amazing stunts as Zorro, Robin Hood, and *The Thief of Bagdad* long before color film and sound ever entered the motion picture. But some of the now forgotten, but then unforgettable, action occurred in silent cliffhanger serials, starting around 1910. In such multiple-chaptered adventures as *The Perils of Pauline, The Exploits of Elaine,* and the more than a hundred (!) episodes of *The Hazards of Helen,* daredevil damsels in distress boggled the audience's minds until sexism reared its ugly head.

Even though male heroes took over by the 1920s, the stuff that stuntpeople were doing are still jaw-dropping when viewed today. At the time, they were creating an entertainment industry and empire, so no safety rules seemed to apply. More than a dozen serials a year were released, each around fifteen chapters long (making the finished film somewhere between four and eight hours), until the 1950s, introducing movie lovers to Flash Gordon, Tarzan, Dick Tracy, Captain Marvel, Captain America, Batman, and even Superman.

GLEN OLIVER

In my mind, "action cinema" began the moment audiences were enthralled and impacted by what they saw on-screen. Given the nature of film and filmmaking in its earliest days, this was most likely something we'd perceive to be mundane today. For example, footage of a train. While not unique in and of itself, it would've been remarkable and affecting because of the way it was delivered, the context in which it was being viewed by audiences unaccustomed to such presentation and technology. The capturing of a discernible, demonstrative action, that was then conveyed to audiences in an unexpected or compelling way. Would this not be a fundamental mission statement for any art or storytelling? And an expectation of most visual narratives even to this day?

JASON CONSTANTINE
(president of coproductions and acquisitions, Lionsgate)

Somebody can make an argument that Buster Keaton's *The General* is an action movie. If you're talking about *The Great Train Robbery,* there's an argument to be made that it's an action movie. So then the question is, "How are we defining the action genre?" Are we defining the action genre

in the context of when the *industry* started talking about it as a genre? There's thrillers, there's mysteries, there's rom-coms, there's dramas, there's comedies, there's sci-fi—these have been well-established genre terms for decades. And then all of a sudden, you have the action genre start to *become* the action genre in the eighties in terms of the industry. So when *is* the birth of the action movie? I would say that nobody was talking about "action" movies until the eighties.

RIC MEYERS

When sound was introduced around 1930, cowboys such as Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and John Wayne still had a place, but the wiseguys who got much of the attention were gangsters like *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* (both 1931). Beautifully balancing out their villainy was Errol Flynn, taking over Douglas Fairbanks's mantle as the king of screen swashbucklers in such classics as *Captain Blood* (1935) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). Once Hitler started to try taking over the world, war movies like *Flying Tigers* (1942) went shoulder to shoulder with Westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939) and swashbucklers like *The Sea Hawk* (1940) to keep the home-front action fans satiated. Not surprisingly, the burgeoning Japanese movie industry had a bomb dropped on it by the end of the war, but it's tough to keep a good samurai down, so they popped back up in the 1950s—as did, also not surprisingly, *Godzilla* and a whole slew of atomic-born action-packed monster movies.

MIKE HOSTENCH
(deputy director, Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival)

Most fast-paced "cliffhangers" or "theatrical serials" of the 1930s and 1940s would be the beginning of film storytelling with a high dose of action aimed to thrill the spectators.

RIC MEYERS

The 1960s were all about James Bond and his knockoffs. In fact, just about the only action films that compared came from the other side of the world, with Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* in 1961 in Japan and Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* in 1967 in Hong Kong. It wasn't until 1968 that

Steve McQueen's *Bullitt* took advantage of Sean Connery leaving his 007 role that there was room for another cool action hero in filmgoers' hearts.

★ ★ ★

To explore the rise of the genre, one has to look back to one of the greatest defining moments in action films—although at the time few realized it—in the form of the arrival of Ian Fleming's James Bond, in the persona of actor Sean Connery, in 1962's Dr. No. *That film, which followed by three years Alfred Hitchcock's brilliantly inventive and influential spy adventure* North by Northwest, *starring Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, and James Mason, ushered in a whole new transformative era for action in movies with its sophisticated wit, breezy pace, and action set pieces such as the classic crop duster sequence and the final confrontation between Grant and a young Martin Landau atop an iconic American monument, Mount Rushmore.*

DANIEL CRAIG
(actor, "James Bond")

Director Marc Forster and I had a long conversation when he came on to do *Quantum of Solace*. We're both big fans of the early *Bonds*, but also of the movies that they spawned in the sixties. They had a direct effect on movies all over.

PHIL NOBILE JR.
(columnist, *Birth.Movies.Death.*)

Nineteen sixty-two's *Dr. No* offers lo-fi, smaller stakes than you might expect from a movie that launched a fifty-five-year film series, but Connery was never better in the role than he is here. Thirty-two years old, all sex and danger, Connery immolates the then stereotype of the wan, prim-and-proper British film hero, invents the action star and maybe the action genre, and changes film history forever.

JAMES STRATTON
(author, *Hitchcock's North by Northwest: The Man Who Had Too Much*)

North by Northwest brought lavish production values, attractive leads, and glamour to what had been grittier, film noir–like narratives. Also,

unlike the more cerebral, complex narratives of le Carré, the emphasis was on a series of loosely connected thrill-ride adventures.

JAMES CHAPMAN
(author, *Hitchcock and the Spy Film*)

Obviously, Bond would go to some wild places that Hitchcock never would have, but, given *North by Northwest*, does it feel like a natural progression for Hitchcock from his spy films to, at the very least, *Dr. No* and *From Russia with Love*? I think the look and style of the early *Bond* films were very strongly influenced by *North by Northwest.* Most spy movies in the 1950s, in Britain and Hollywood, were relatively low-budget, black-and-white affairs. Supporting features at best. Hitchcock's film demonstrated that the genre could be mounted on a bigger, more spectacular, A-feature scale.

PETER HUNT
(editor, *Dr. No, From Russia with Love,* and *Goldfinger*; director, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*)

Of course everybody has forgotten it now, because we've all fallen into that idiom in the way of presenting films—we always cut films in the way I did *Dr. No*—but at that time, that was something completely different to do. If you looked at any films made before 1961, even American films, they always have the guy walking down the steps, through the gates, getting into the car, and driving away. We don't do any of that anymore. The fellow says he's going, and he's there. You cut to the chase, which is what I did in *Dr. No* in order to make it move fast and push it along the whole time, while giving it a certain style. Now, of course, that style is standard for everything.

TERENCE YOUNG
(director, *Dr. No, From Russia with Love,* and *Thunderball*)

Nobody had ever cut pictures the way we did the *Bond* films. *Dr. No* and *From Russia with Love* were an absolute breath of fresh air in the cutting rooms. Even director David Lean, who's one of the best cutters in the business, used to come and watch *From Russia with Love* on the Moviola while we were cutting it. He was cutting *Lawrence of Arabia* in the

next room at the same time and often used to say that he wished we could swap films.

STANLEY SOPEL
(associate producer, *Dr. No)*

Peter Hunt hadn't been the first choice as editor, but right away, we could see he had the right feeling for what we wanted to do. I remember shouting matches between Peter and Terence Young and other directors when he implored them to keep the scenes short and avoid long speeches. "This is an action picture, not Shakespeare!" he would tell them.

LISA FUNNELL
(author, *For His Eyes Only: The Women of James Bond*)

The *Bond* films are among the first in the action genre, and over time, they become more action-oriented. The fight sequences in *Dr. No* are very short. They usually center on combat between Bond and a single opponent or small group. The fight sequences are short, ranging from five to thirty seconds (if that). And the fighting style is straightforwardly American fisticuffs. Over the course of the franchise, the fight sequences become more complex, pulled from a greater range of fighting like kung fu in *Man with the Golden Gun* and athletic/sport like parkour in *Casino Royale* traditions, and the duration of the sequences increases.

★ ★ ★

One of the landmark action scenes in cinema (and most enduring) dates back to the second James Bond film, 1963's From Russia with Love, *and the violent fight between Connery's 007 and Robert Shaw's Red Grant aboard the Orient Express that showcased what separated Bond from other big-screen heroes at the time. It's an adrenaline-fueled battle set within the claustrophobic confines of a train cabin with revolutionary editing by Peter Hunt.*

PETER HUNT

[Director] Terence [Young], I think, was a little nervous, because it was the second one, and he wasn't sure how it was all going to come out. He

soon overrode that, and the confidence came back, helped, in no small way, by one of the definitive fights of all time on the train. The carriage was built on the set, and we had three cameras filming that scene, which was great. It took a lot of manipulating in the cutting, but anything good almost always does.

STEVEN JAY RUBIN
(author, *The James Bond Encyclopedia*)

It's one of the most bloodthirsty examples of hand-to-hand combat ever filmed. With Richard Maibaum's script linked to Peter Perkins's choreography, it was James Bond at his best.

RIC MEYERS

The fights in *Dr. No*, even the climactic one with the metal-handed title villain, were frosting on the action cake. The train fight in *From Russia with Love* was clearly the central highlight of the entire film. Everything that comes afterward pales in comparison. Director Terence Young apparently wanted to do the sequence as Hitchcock would have done it—a supposition supported by his choice to have no music, bathe most of the scene in blue light, and have villain Red Grant break the train window so sound effects would flood the compartment.

BOB SIMMONS
(stunt arranger/stunt double, *From Russia with Love*)

If you look at that scene over again, you will see it isn't so much the action, but it is the sound effects: everything builds up, and it isn't so much the visual action as what you're listening to.

RIC MEYERS

Not surprisingly, the result is a landmark classic in the annals of action cinema.

STEVEN JAY RUBIN

With increased attention to style and pace, the writers began, for the first time, to lose sight of Fleming's Bond. If the novels had at times resembled comic strips, they still included their brief studies of a man

undergoing extreme pressure. Fleming's Bond went through typical middle-age hang-ups. He had health problems, bouts of sexual melancholy, an obsession with drink and cigarettes, and doubts about his own effectiveness as a human being. He was human, and he fought against an inhuman world with his own wits and a few surprises. With *Goldfinger,* the *Bond* writers created a new agent, an indestructible man who would survive any situation. It was no longer a question of whether Bond would survive; it merely became a case of which button he would push or what he would say.

RICHARD MAIBAUM
(screenwriter, *Goldfinger*)

It is true that with *Goldfinger,* we were getting wilder. The whole business was becoming larger than life. We also took into consideration the audience's growing sophistication. We dared to do something seldom done in action pictures, by mixing what was funny with what was serious.

TOM MANKIEWICZ
(screenwriter, *Diamonds Are Forever*)

I think what turned the *Bond* pictures around—and long before I got on them—was that Aston Martin DB5 in *Goldfinger.* I think the minute Sean pressed the button for the ejector seat and the audience roared, the series turned around. The audience saw outlandish things they had never seen before, and the natural response of anybody—a writer, a filmmaker—is to give them more of what they want. And there's a constant pressure, as the films gross a great deal of money, to make each one bigger and "more" than the last. That car was the first enormous piece of hardware that just opened the dikes. After that car, *anything* went. If you could believe that, you could believe anything.

★ ★ ★

And today, six decades after the James Bond films were first released in theaters, the audience still believes, as evidenced by the twenty-fifth 007 adventure, No Time to Die, *which pushed the action of the venerable franchise to new heights including the reintroduction of a fully loaded Aston Martin, first introduced in* Goldfinger, *equipped with machine guns, a*

staple of the Bond *series. The importance of weapons to the* Bond *films, and any action movies, are made clear with the way almost every 007 film opens: the iconic gun barrel sequence where James Bond steps out into a gun barrel, turns and fires, striking his target, who begins to bleed out to the strains of the classic James Bond theme. And Bond would be as naked without his iconic Walther PPK as the myriad Bond girls he has bedded over 25 official films. The Walther being as important to James Bond as the Winchester was to a myriad of Western heroes or the tommy gun to the gangsters of the classic Warner Bros. gangster films.*

RIC MEYERS

Guns have always been a part of cinema. One of the most iconic images in movie history is the close-up shot (if you'll excuse the expression) of a cowboy firing his six-shooter straight at the camera at the end of the landmark, pioneering 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery.* But from then on, especially exemplified by the serial and series Western movies and TV shows from the 1920s to the 1960s, the gun became a magic, never-emptying, rarely accurate device used predominantly to fill time by adding action sequences and eliminating the need for a more complicated, nuanced solution to any conflict.

HARVEY O'BRIEN
(author*, Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back*)

The complexity of what was being said with that gunplay was greater than the vocabulary of the standard Western variety, though. Think of the classically impassive face of Schwarzenegger compared to, for example, Chow Yun-fat. There's always something else going on.

RIC MEYERS

Having fired every weapon available during my years writing *Dirty Harry* novels, I quickly realized just how inaccurate Hollywood's depictions of guns were. I can think of no film in the entire history of cinema where guns' recoil, shell shards, deafening sounds, and burning heat are made part of the slaughtering experience. And never have I seen a movie moment when a hot bullet casing being ejected from any automatic weapon ever hit a bystander.

AUSTIN TRUNICK
(author, *The Cannon Film Guide: Volume I, 1980–1984*)

Those films taught audiences that firearms and the damage they cause—the breaking glass, the spurts of blood—can be oddly beautiful. They brought a visual poetry to gunplay that was absent before. With American action films of the eighties, the most aesthetically attractive things on-screen weren't the machine guns or rocket launchers but the shirtless, supremely chiseled actors firing them. The biggest action stars of that time looked like statues carved by Michelangelo, but with assault rifles tucked under their biceps. The Hong Kong films, on the other hand, gave viewers something to look at beyond the howling muscle-heads of American action films and trained their cameras instead on the choreography of chaos.

RIC MEYERS

By the time armory-fueled, muscle-bound heroes began to proliferate in the 1970s and '80s, the guns changed their magical attributes and began to grow in size and complexity—seemingly to mirror their steroided owners—although their basic use remained the same: to shoot projectiles that never seemed to run out. However, to continue to bolster the filmmakers' apparent desire to avoid nuance, reality, and complications, they also appeared to be featherlight and supremely simple to use. There were extremely rare exceptions—such as the low-budget cult film *Gun Crazy* in 1950, where the doomed lovers had a more complex and obsessed relationship with the power these devices gave them, but they still used them with relative ease and were generally guilt-free about it. It wasn't until 1961 that the true, core, seed of "gun fu" premiered in, of all places, Japan.

★ ★ ★

Japan had a much different relationship in cinema—and life—with their bladed weapon of choice, samurai swords, considered extensions of the person themselves as opposed to simply an instrument of death. As a result, everything one did with them was infused with a personal weight, unlike the casual, even impersonal, dependence on guns that cowboys had.

RIC MEYERS

The samurai sword had to be used in close proximity to the target and, unlike bullets, always cut deep—figuratively and literally—having a lasting effect on both the cutter and the cuttee. Not so the gun, at least according to the vast majority of flicks the West made. In those, mowing down masses seemed extremely easy *and* with no aftereffects. Unlike America, Japan frowned, to say the least, on guns. To the point that any Nippon filmmaker who wanted to use them on set had to build their own in the prop and special effects departments. That reflected the real-life historical Japanese perspective on the things, which the samurai class disdained as too easy. They perceived their warrior state, which lasted from the 1100s to the 1970s, as cultured, disciplined, and honorable, so all their conflicts and duels had to display superior sword skill rather than simply taking the easy, high-caliber way out.

Naturally, World War II complicated the country's world cinema contributions, but then Akira Kurosawa revolutionized the chambara genre with *Seven Samurai* in 1954. Although it was remade in America as *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960, it wasn't until Kurosawa's 1961 samurai classic *Yojimbo* (which was remade as *A Fistful of Dollars* in 1964 Italy) that the gun fu seed began to bloom—because the difference between an impersonal action film with guns and a gun fu movie is the user's relationship with their weapon. But what made the gun fu seed truly blossom came the following year with *Zatoichi,* directed by the vastly underrated Kenji Misumi. Zatoichi was a blind swordsman, masseuse, and gambler, not a samurai, who used his cane sword as truly an extension of himself. The beautifully, emotionally made movie led to a hugely popular film series that was virtually unknown in America but wildly influential in Hong Kong, whose kinetic, pervasive action cinema was just taking shape.

Yes, the gun fu genre was growing, but 1963 saw a direct descendent to a certain John Wick appear, in the form of an alienated half-breed ronin named Kyoshiro Nemuri—alternately known as Son of Black Mass or Sleepy Eyes of Death. Nemuri, the debauched redheaded spawn of the rape of a Japanese woman by a Nordic missionary, traveled Japan during the 1800s taking on all comers in the vain hope of finding someone skilled enough to kill him. By then, the sluice was well and truly open, and the following years saw the cinematic introduction of James Bond (who started every film with a gun barrel targeting him), the continuation of the *Fistful of*

Dollars films, Sam Peckinpah's gun orgy, 1969's *The Wild Bunch*, Clint Eastwood's gun-rhapsodizing *Dirty Harry* in 1971, the 1972 appearance of the rule-breaking Itto Ogami in the Japanese Baby Cart films (a.k.a. *Lone Wolf and Cub*), and John Rambo's *First Blood* in 1982 when things were still personal. But still, true gun fu was not yet visible.

MIKE HOSTENCH

We all know that the martial arts/kung fu movies started in Hong Kong during the silent 1920s, and you can have a taste of it on YouTube. Most were stories glorifying folk heroes like "gung fu"/"wu-she" master Wong Fei-hung, practically the inventor of "gung fu" and the man who inspired Bruce Lee to follow the path of Jeet Kune Do. With time, the "gung fu" became kung fu and a genre in itself. Nevertheless, and while in Asia, period kung fu movies were extremely popular, Bruce Lee and Jimmy Wang Yu in the early 1970s are the first kung fu superstars on a global scale.

RIC MEYERS

Kung fu movies weren't considered action films *in the West.* Like so many movies before them, the studios/critics looked down on them, prime examples being all the kung fu films being labeled the stinker-and-skunk of the week on the *Siskel & Ebert* review show. They *were* considered action films *in the East.* And, in fact, are the very definition of action films in that if their action was removed, there'd be no movie! Also keep in mind that studios/critics needed to distinguish between the kind of action movies they were, hence Westerns, cliffhangers, kung fu, et cetera.

Hong Kong cinema was simply carrying on in their tradition of melding kinetic style with emotional substance. They took the stunning athleticism and acrobatics of ballet with the emotional content of opera. They also took the internal/external, mental/physical, martial/healing aspects of their centuries-old kung fu techniques and gave it cinematic form, pitting talent against talent and style against style. Be it Monkey versus Snake or Drunken versus Tiger or hundreds of others. Sadly, the efforts of some Western producers, seemingly fearing for their own bottom line and homegrown action directors, did insidious things to diminish the Hong Kong action influence. But even beyond those racist efforts, it would

be hard to grow a genre that required a majority of its stars to be as skilled as Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Bruce Lee, and Jackie Chan. And the birth of the gun fu genre came with John Woo and *A Better Tomorrow.* Everything else followed, including Ringo Lam and the great Johnnie To.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

When I first watched *A Better Tomorrow* while I was in high school in the mid-'80s, I felt, "Wow, this is martial arts with guns." I'd never seen that before. I used to walk around copying Chow Yun-fat from that movie. So John Woo is a huge influence on the way we do action now. He basically started that mode of gunfighting for me.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

I guess John Woo is the filmmaker I'd most associate with it. *Last Hurrah for Chivalry* was classic wuxia, but *A Better Tomorrow* seems the obvious template for what would follow and get called gun fu. Others may have been thinking the same way, but it was the stylistic continuity and the consistent morality that makes Woo distinctive as a contributor to the emergence of the form, if it is a form (maybe it's a style). I was at a special event in the Irish Film Institute in the early 1990s, where Woo was touring with a program of his films (BFI [British Film Institute] had done it, and the IFI got it, too). I was very struck by his sincerity as a person, and again, I think that's important in thinking about action films beyond the "mere" genre elements. It brings me back to talking about John McTiernan and what makes his films work—again I think there's a solid core of the filmmaker taking the filmmaking seriously. It's not that they're not out to make a buck, but in so doing, they're approaching the work and the audience, who will view it with respect, and I think that's indisputable in the case of Woo. Certainly, Woo's films were the first where I noted what we're calling gun fu, whereas Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung and that generation were still very much doing Peking Opera Blues—so to speak … yes I'm deliberately referencing Tsui Hark—and using weapons as props in a juggling display. Gun fu put more emphasis on the use of the weapon expressively, and I think Woo is where I first saw that … leaving aside Dirty Harry's soliloquies to the weapon, of course.

DEREK KOLSTAD

It wasn't until later in high school and into college when you'd go over to the video store and they had the foreign section. Growing up, "foreign" was kind of a dirty word. I'm from Madison, Wisconsin—we were troglodytes, but we just didn't watch foreign movies. But then you start getting introduced to Donnie Yen and Sammo Hung and Jet Li and John Woo and *Hard Boiled* and you're like, "What the hell?" The first time I saw the shoot-out in the nursery in *Hard Boiled,* it was like, "What the fuck?" And then we start talking about gun fu.

The first gun fu would arguably be all the Westerns. The first time you saw someone quick draw and fan the hammer? What the hell. Chuck Connors in *The Rifleman,* what is this? *Silverado,* same kind of mid-'80s movie, with the Henry rifle. You had kind of the magical realism of these films that are so much fun to watch. But I would argue the first true gun fu movie I ever saw was *Equilibrium,* which was Kurt Wimmer and Christian Bale. That first action sequence was done way too stylistically for my taste, with darkness, shadow, and light. But when they start doing the gun-kata, I think they called it, suddenly, you're like, "Oh man, this shit just feels fun." You got to watch all of this stuff a little bit tongue-firmly-entrenched-in-teeth, you know? But it's a blast.

MIKE HOSTENCH

If we think about more contemporary action, the 1970s are the turning point in this universe, with sequences conceived specifically to raise the adrenaline of the audience. *The French Connection* encompasses a heavy dose of vérité in its intentions. This and its European flavor made it popular among the critics worldwide, giving it a patina of "respectability" for the high-brow segment of the audience. This was also an era where the directors were the stars and people were taking more seriously the helmer's craft and started considering them as some kind of artists. However, I'm sure that if you ask William Friedkin, he would confirm he was very conscious he was making a good and sophisticated gangster film and an action film at the same time. I would blush calling it "avant-garde action."

RIC MEYERS

Once that floodgate opened, a careening carload of cool cops came shooting in, including *Dirty Harry*, *Shaft*, and *The French Connection.* Everybody else would have to wait because, at the same time, Bruce Lee showed up in Asia and the kung fu sluices opened, flooding the world with *Five Fingers of Death*, *Fists of Fury,* and even *Drunken Master*. Meanwhile, back in Japan, alienated sword-slingers ruled, with *Zatoichi*, *Lone Wolf and Cub,* and many others slicing for attention. But just when it seemed there'd be no more room for any other blades, lightsabers showed up in 1977, and the *Star Wars* universe opened.

GLEN OLIVER

Action is frequently utilized as a necessary supportive mechanism for other storytelling that doesn't otherwise hinge on what we commonly define as "action." For example, one can have a movie which is largely a drama or comedy, but an action scene—a race to catch a plane at an airport, for example—might define and determine the outcome of whatever narrative is being spun, even though that narrative itself is not inherently action-centric. A fight scene may determine the path of an otherwise low-key, tepid tale. A spectacular car wreck might shape the entire outcome of a dysfunctional family drama in which everyone is otherwise sitting around talking, moping, and reconciling. The potential utilization (and combinations) of action within nonaction genres is endless—*and* profound. When viewed forensically, I think it's safe to say that action—arguably more than any other quality or device in storytelling—is the most flexible and valuable asset to getting things done and making things happen across the considerable spectrum of genres.

JASON CONSTANTINE

Nobody said *The French Connection* was an action movie. Nobody said that Steve McQueen was in action movies—though we could argue he was. And nobody said that the Sean Connery James Bond movies were action movies. Obviously, in hindsight, we'd say the James Bond movies were action movies, and Roger Moore action movies in the seventies.

RIC MEYERS

Those films—*The French Connection* and *Bullitt*—were not about action. They were about gangsters, police, adventure, et cetera, and all too often, their action scenes could be removed without affecting the film's story in any way. If the action is integral and the changing or eliminating of it would leave you with no real film, then that's an action movie. The rest is just studio/critic ego and the need to control the industry's labels.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

To understand the beefy, monosyllabic American action hero of the 1980s, we need to examine the American "action star," which truly became a "thing" during that decade. Dirty Harry and the Man with No Name were two of the many different roles Clint Eastwood played, but those weren't the only things he was doing at the time. Gene Hackman was incredible as Popeye Doyle, but action was only one small part of his acting arsenal. Steve McQueen made one of the all-time classic action films with *Bullitt*, but most people probably wouldn't think of him as an "action star." Burt Reynolds, Mel Gibson, Sean Connery—these were all "movie" stars who made action movies.

GLEN OLIVER

It comes down to how action is used. Is action a requirement to advance the narrative? Or is it icing on the cake/a vehicle to keep audiences involved? Movies like *Bullitt*, *The French Connection*, sections of Dirty Harry films, et cetera, relied on action to accentuate and facilitate plot elements, but the overall drive of their stories did not intrinsically hinge on the presence of said action. With a tweak or two, the same macro stories could've been conveyed in an entirely different manner. Thus, they're procedural/crime movies with action elements—elements which contributed greatly, by the way, to the Action Renaissance we'd see in the eighties … but they are not "action movies" per se. Whereas when Indiana Jones is trying to keep the Nazis from acquiring the Power of God? Or John McClane is trying to save the plaza from dastardly Eurotrash thugs? It would not be easy to write around the inherent need for action to resolve those narratives and challenges.

MIKE HOSTENCH

I can think of five main types of action developed in the seventies to its full glory that changed the face of action cinema. First, car chases—with *The French Connection* as the best example. Car-porn action such as *Vanishing Point* and *Convoy* are also pretty close. Second, running chases—with the iconic persecution of Steve McQueen through the streets of Chicago. Third, gunfights. Michael Ritchie's *Prime Cut,* a shoot-out at the country fair, comes to mind. Although we can't forget the threshing machine versus Marvin and Spacek sequence. Also, Sam Peckinpah's most violent works were very influential for future generations of European and Asian filmmakers. Fourth, man-to-man drama martial arts movies, with Bruce Lee as the flagship and all the Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest productions following. Fifth, the very unique Japanese crime-action-thriller movies known as the Jitsuroku genre (or "true record"). Those were extreme examples of ultraviolet Yakuza flicks with knife-wielding duels and extra-bloody gun massacres. Those were the years that made superstars of Takakura Ken, Watari Tetsuya, and Sonny Chiba. The latter also incorporated martial arts to the bloody mix.

RIC MEYERS

Larger-than-life heroes ruled the entertainment industry through the 1980s and way beyond. *Rocky* from 1976 to 2018, *Rambo, Conan the Barbarian, The Terminator, Indiana Jones, Lethal Weapon, Die Hard.* How could the occasional superhero such as *Superman* in 1978 and *Batman* in 1989 hope to compete? Thankfully, Stan Lee knew something they didn't know, but that boot wouldn't drop for another decade or so.

JASON CONSTANTINE

My thesis remains that action didn't become a genre until the eighties. I'd had a conversation with Sylvester Stallone about this. Sly was like, "Yeah, in the seventies, nobody was talking about action movies. But in the eighties, they were." Now, I haven't really dug deep into my thesis, but if it's correct, it's fascinating to think about the action genre's evolution by decade: the '80s, the '90s, the early 2000s, and then the 2010s.

Just to switch genres, you can look at the horror genre, and there are certain movies that come along that have a particular impact that separates the genre before and after that movie. Films like *Godzilla, Psycho, Texas*

Chain Saw Massacre, *Stepford Wives*, any of the slasher films from the eighties, whether it was *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*, which has more of a supernatural quality. Then you get to the nineties and, say, *Scream* and *Blair Witch.*

You can talk about the horror genre as before and after movies like that. And then in the 2000s, I'd say *Saw* and *Paranormal Activity* a little bit later. Actually, I'd say *Paranormal Activity* is still in the post–*Blair Witch* era with a new version of a found-footage movie. And then there's *Get Out*, which is one of those definitive movies that you can talk about before and after.

RIC MEYERS

What set *The Wild Bunch*, a cult classic, apart from other revisionist Westerns of the sixties and seventies was its graphic content, as well as its then-new filming and editing style, which heightened its gunfights into scattershot explosions of sound, color, slow motion, torn flesh, and splattering blood. There's little question that this movie set the schematic for John Woo. Any film, in this case 1971's *Dirty Harry*, that is remembered predominantly for its title character's loving ode to his sidearm, has got to be one of the pillars of the still gestating gun fu genre. "But being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself a question…" From that moment on, the handgun was more than a prop; it was a can't-take-your-eyes-off-it costar.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The Chuck Norris movies are weird. I grew up with them, I love them, but they're just strange. Not in a bad way. It's almost like we were finding our stride with a lot of these kind of things. Because with *Lethal Weapon* and with *Die Hard*—remember in *Die Hard*, he tries to leave. He doesn't want to be the hero. And he's kind of a shitty cop. And yet, he leans into his shittiness and murders everyone, right? But then you have the first *Lethal Weapon* with a suicidal cop. I remember as a kid, when he's in his trailer and he puts the bullet in, and he starts breaking down—and you're like, "I'm very uncomfortable." For good reason.

And then when you go back and watch *Dirty Harry*—when you watch *Dirty Harry* as a kid, you're like, "Oh, what a badass cop." Then you watch it as an adult and you're like, "Oh, he was making fun of all of the cop movies at the time." But I think to me, *Rocky* and *Rambo,* and the work Stallone did in the seventies and eighties has been key. Rocky's not the best fighter, Rambo's not the best soldier, but they get up. It's about will. Once you lean into will—ahhh, fuck yeah—I want to follow that guy. And I want to follow him for a long time.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

I remember screaming in the theater when Rocky's beating up Drago in *Rocky IV.* And that's the feeling I want when people watch the movies I work on. Where you're *so* into it and you're rooting the character on to win. So if it makes you physically say something or emote some type of response, *that's* the feeling you want.

GLEN OLIVER

There's a general perception that *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* were epicenters for the reinvention of the action genre—both were unquestionably *tremendously* significant and pivotal. It's important to acknowledge, however, that the films—each in their own way—were, to a meaningful degree, the result of filmmaking proclivities and trends which were already afoot by the time they were actually made and released. I'd argue that they weren't, themselves, an actual "evolution" but, instead, were the clearest, most startling examples to date of a narrative/perceptual recalibration that had already been baking for some time. *Top Gun,* for example, had been released in 1986—a full year before *Lethal Weapon. Top Gun* has nothing in common with *Lethal Weapon,* but *Top Gun* suggested the type of energy-infused, visceral, in-your-face filmmaking that would later be so skillfully evolved by Richard Donner's team in *Lethal Weapon.* I'm not asserting that *Lethal Weapon* was inspired by *Top Gun*—not at all. Merely that filmmakers were already grooving on a different vibe, recognizing new and visceral potentials in cinema, and redefining big-screen artistry by the time *Lethal* came out.

RIC MEYERS

Originally a standard muscle-bound late eighties action film in the vein of *Commando* and *Rambo,* the cookie-cutter fate of 1988's *Die Hard* was avoided by the largely decried casting of a lowly TV actor named Bruce Willis—who decided to remold John McClane from a superman to an everyman, who, shock upon sin, actually showed effort, emotion, and pain when using a gun. That paid off but, sadly, only for the sequel in 1990. By the time of *Die Hard with a Vengeance* in 1995, it was back to effortless business as usual.

GLEN OLIVER

Die Hard was the result of a similar critical mass. John McTiernan's *Predator* was released in 1987, a full two years before *Die Hard. Die Hard*'s sense of visceral bravado was clearly evidenced in that picture. Mark L. Lester's dopey, fun, raw actioner *Commando* was released in 1985, two years before *Predator.* It was written by one of the writers of *Die Hard* (Steven E. de Souza) and edited by John F. Link, who would later go on to edit *Predator* and *Die Hard,* all of which were produced by Joel Silver.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA
(screenwriter, *Commando, Die Hard*)

Jim Berkus, my agent, calls me up and says, "Listen, I want you to come to our agency Christmas party at the firm because Joel Silver wants to talk to you." He tells me that [the president of 20th Century Fox] Barry Diller has a movie going with Arnold Schwarzenegger, but we've got to see Arnold immediately [to close the deal] and because of the way we worked in television, he thought I could come up with something overnight.

The next day I go over to Fox. Not just me, but a dozen people or so who worked for [producers] Larry Gordon and Joel Silver, are given every script that's gathering dust in the back shelves of 20th Century Fox that could remotely be an Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle. Because Diller had run into Schwarzenegger at a cocktail party, and came to Larry Gordon and said, "I met Arnold Schwarzenegger, he's actually a really funny guy—if you can come up with a feature for him, I'll greenlight it for ten million dollars. We need movies in the pipeline." So everybody agrees on a script called *Commando,* which is the closest thing to an Arnold project, but it's problematic. The character's wife and child are not kidnapped to Page 47,

and the hero of the movie is actually a former Mossad agent, an Israeli agent, living in America. This is kind of a stretch for Arnold. So, I come in the next day, and say, “This is the way I see it can go.” I throw out some ideas and they say, “Great, you’re going to go see Arnold at 1:00 P.M. today.” I go, “Wait a minute, I just rolled out of bed.” They say, “C’mon, we know you’re a television writer—it’s an hour drive, by the time you get there you’ll have it all worked out.” We get there, and [director] Mark Lester joins us. They say, “Tell the story to Arnold.” So finally I finish telling Arnold the story, and he says, “I like this part. I’m not a robot from the future or a caveman from the past—I’m wearing clothes John Wayne could have. I’m doing this picture.” So we get back into the car and Joel has a car phone. This is 1985, I guess, so they patch us through to 20th Century Fox. “Arnold’s in.” “Get right back here.”

So I go to Larry Gordon’s office, and he has a stenographer and the head of physical production in his office, and he says, “Tell us what you told Arnold, and we’ll break it down like you do a TV episode.” So I said, “The opening scene is three mysterious whackings, probably five pages to whack three people—could be practical, could be backlot. Five pages. Next scene, Arnold with his daughter, title sequence, probably four pages—petting zoo, ice cream parlor, probably practical location.” And I go through this—and keep saying, like we did in television, “Probably two pages, probably four pages, probably a practical location.” Just knowing the way they wanted it to work. Larry Gordon says, “How many pages is that?” She says, “A hundred and five pages.” “Perfect! Steve, start writing the script. Do not change any locations without letting us know because we need to put this picture into production immediately, because the writers strike starts May 5th and all writing has to stop.” And this is already like March.

GLEN OLIVER

There were clearly defined MVPs on the field—ingredients already being whipped in the mixing bowl—and a discernible path towards *Die Hard* in 1988.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

Commando has a cult following. There are websites devoted to it. I invented a fake country for *Commando*—this is something [producer]

Harve Bennett taught me in some of the early scripts I did with him for *The Six Million Dollar Man*—because we were always dealing with Commies, we would say, “The Cuban Ambassador to the U.N. is involved in drug smuggling.” He’d say, “You can’t say that.” I’d say, “Why not? They’re Commies.” “I understand, but we could get sued.” So Harve Bennett and I and everybody else was always making up fake countries. My favorite fake country I made for *The Bionic Woman* once—was a country called Toluca. Because there was a neighborhood called Toluca Lake and there was a building called the Toluca Embassy—an apartment building. So I wrote a scene—it was the last episode of *The Bionic Woman*—where Lindsay Wagner was bodyguarding the daughter of the Tolucan Ambassador. So I had a scene where she comes out of the Tolucan Embassy and—it’s a stupid joke.

For *Commando*, I made up a country called Valverde. Which then Joel Silver recycled for *Predator*. Which then I recycled for *Commando 2*. So we had our own little brain trust that after General Arias was deposed from *Commando*, the subsequent government involved the guy from *Commando 2*. And then other people starting catching on—until now when you go online—somebody has made a Valverde Wikipedia page. *Forbes* magazine somehow picked up on the fact that Mary Ellen Trainor who plays a newscaster in *Die Hard* also appears in *Ricochet*—and when Jan de Bont made *Speed*, he put a truck in from Pacific Courier, which is the same truck that pulls up to the building in *Die Hard*. So *Forbes* magazine said it’s the other $30 million shared universe that 20th Century Fox had. Everybody knows about the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but look at this one.

DAVID LEITCH
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *Deadpool 2, Bullet Train,* and *Atomic Blonde*)

Not counting movies that I’ve actually worked on as a stunt performer that were actually influential—*The Matrix, 300, Fight Club*—I would say before I started movies, there was a whole litany of films that made a deep impression on me. *Die Hard* is probably number one, just because the character of John McClane is the archetype for how to make an empathetic everyman hero. The action was great and sort of ahead of its time, but most importantly, the action serviced the character so well. I *still* apply the John

McClane model in the stuff that I design. And *Lethal Weapon* is in the same sort of vibe as *Die Hard*, but in terms of the quintessential buddy cop comedy, it's head and shoulders above, especially with the live wire, loose cannon character. But also, the action is crazy.

GLEN OLIVER

Lethal Weapon and *Die Hard* were perfect storms in many regards. They represented the well-considered alchemy of not only materials and talent but long-shifting filmmaking explorations and attitudes. They were the fusion of a number of tropes from various genres culled across a broad number of years, skillfully assembled into a product which was fresh and provocative—yet also comfortably, accessibly familiar. In this regard, *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* were not dissimilar to Lucas's original *Star Wars* movie. They felt utterly "new" in and of themselves—yet their components weren't necessarily so, if you slid them under a microscope. They're dissonant—even brutal—hybridizations of elements from numerous inspirations, expertly grafted by directors with clear visions, writers with a strong cross-genre knowledge base, and editors possessing either the instinct or mandate to maximize raw, visceral impact.

DEREK KOLSTAD

I love hearing people say they love *John Wick*, but then they say how new it was. I'm like, "Good God, man. No, it ain't!" It's all the shit I grew up with and loved. I'm forty-six, and I'm a child of the eighties. But I watched my grandfather's movies, I watched my father's movies and genres, especially noir and crime thrillers, and they always had that same heartbeat. Yet what ended up happening in my life was *Die Hard*, *Predator*, and *Lethal Weapon*, which all came out during the same three-year stretch. Suddenly, you're like, "Oh shit, you *can* do that." Then you add *Aliens* into the mix and *Black Rain*, and you're like, "Oh, you can do a samurai movie against a present-day landscape while you're still in Tokyo." The possibilities were endless.

★ ★ ★

*With the advent of home video in the early eighties, actors like Sylvester Stallone (*Rocky, Rambo*), Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Commando, Predator, The Terminator*) and Bruce Willis (*Die Hard*) became genre megastars as the center of the action movie universe. And while they top-lined mostly A-list studio pictures, another dramatic entry in the action film sweepstakes of the eighties was the explosion of Cannon Films, the production and distribution company of go-go boys Golan and Globus, whose roster of action stars like Chuck Norris and an aging Charles Bronson harkened back to the old studio system where the moguls had most of their biggest stars under contract, from Cary Grant to Bette Davis.*

AUSTIN TRUNICK

Cannon Films burst onto the scene just at the right time for their style of low-budget moviemaking. Their arrival coincided with not only the home video boom but the advent of premium cable. They were one of the first companies to embrace those markets and truly exploit them. With empty shelves and hours of airtime to fill, there was a sudden, massive need for new movies in the early eighties. That was a space that Cannon was more than happy to step up and fill, even if it was mostly with Chuck Norris movies.

JASON CONSTANTINE

The explosion of the action genre in the eighties has a lot to do with the advent of VHS. There's a fascinating interconnectivity of creativity and economics, because VHS—coupled with the international market—was a huge part of contributing to the economic explosion of actors becoming the highest-paid movie stars on planet Earth. And that's because of the rewatchability of action movies. You almost want to say, "Oh, it's just visuals," but it's the whole toolbox. The horror genre is the whole toolbox, too, but in action movies, it's your shot, the composition of your shot, your coverage, your editing, your sound design, and your music. I've spent so much time in edit rooms, and you can give the same raw footage of an action scene to one hundred different edit rooms and you're going to have one hundred different ways to edit an action scene. In certain movies, the editing is so brilliant and so extraordinary and so definitive anyway. That's

one of the reasons the action genre is so intrinsically cinematic on the big screen and one of the reasons it was intrinsically rewatchable on VHS.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

I grew up during the era of video stores. On Friday evenings, I would go with my father to one local shop or another, and we'd rent a couple of tapes. It was when your entire weekend's entertainment was decided in a few minutes of looking through all of the eye-catching box art and then flipping the cases over to read a couple of sentences' worth of synopsis and glance at the postage-stamp-sized movie still. We would take them home and then watch one each night. That was when I fell in love with movies. Back in those days, when VHS tapes still filled the shelves at the rental shops, Cannon was king. They had movies on almost every shelf—and *so* many of them! You didn't have to look far to find their familiar arrow logo emblazoned on the front of a box. On top of that, their artwork was almost always eye-catching; they knew how to sell their movies on compelling artwork alone. At least in that respect, I think they did things as well as anyone else in the market.

GLEN OLIVER

Cannon action movies quickly and effectively demonstrated that "action" did not intrinsically have to be defined and executed in accordance with the lofty standards set forth by films like *Commando, Predator, Die Hard,* or *Lethal Weapon.* Similar to many Roger Corman pictures, the Cannon cavalcade of action told us that action could be a little more humble, a little more scrappy, a little less polished, but still be entertaining in and of itself.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

The rise of video rental and cable in the same period also changed our viewing habits. Audiences going to the video store weren't looking for the newest movie out there; otherwise, they would have gone to the theater. When it came to video stores, a lot of the time, if you found a movie you liked, you'd return the next night or the next weekend just looking for something that was similar. That could be why the genre labels grew more

broad and generic, because rental customers were looking more for an overall “feel” of a movie rather than specificity.

JASON CONSTANTINE

VHS exploded, and this was way before DVD came around. It was a whole other economic stream that didn’t exist in the seventies, plus you have HBO and cable TV hitting its stride. All of a sudden, that’s another revenue stream. And *then*, Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and Willis become the highest-paid movie stars in the world, which was also part of this action genre exploding.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

Cable and video stores also gave rise to what I lovingly refer to as “pizza and beer” movies. These are the movies that you wouldn’t necessarily go out to the theater to see but would bring home with you on a Friday night and watch over pizza and a few beers. I don’t want to say that video stores lowered the bar for movies, but they certainly lowered the risk. If a particular movie wasn’t great, it wasn’t like you wasted gasoline and an entire evening on it. If you watched the tape with your family or a few pals, your savings were even greater. A lot of video stores in those days offered better deals if you rented more than one movie at a time, which I think was for this reason: it made it harder to feel like you got burned. I think it’s pretty telling that there was no demand for *Death Wish* sequels from 1974 to 1982, then along comes video and—bam!—the market could suddenly support four more of them.

JASON CONSTANTINE

So the studios were like, “We’re making more of *these*. We’re spending more money to get more production value on these action movies. These really big action stars are worth a lot of money to us, so we’re going to be paying them a lot of money.” It was this amazing convergence of a new technology, a new window, a new revenue stream, and this new genre of action, and together, it was this symbiotic relationship that allowed the action genre to continue to explode in the eighties.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

Low-budget action films starring Charles Bronson, Chuck Norris, and Michael Dudikoff were Cannon's bread and butter. Those guys would star in a new movie for Cannon every year, and sometimes more frequently than that. Cannon knew they could always turn a profit on low- and mid-budget action movies featuring their proven stars, and they used that to finance many of their more ambitious projects. Cannon made a lot of different types of movies over the years: comedies, horror movies, musicals, erotic films, period dramas, and literary adaptations among them. They were throwing all sorts of ideas at the wall, but action is what stuck for them and was usually the most successful.

GLEN OLIVER

One of the wonderful-but-strange contradictions about Cannon was how the relatively dodgy quality of much of their output contrasted so sharply with the company's clear ability to recognize and advance interesting material. *Runaway Train* is a very provocative piece of filmmaking—that's a Cannon movie. *Cobra*—high-end dopiness from Stallone—was Golan/Globus. *Lifeforce* and Barbet Schroeder's *Barfly* were Cannon.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

Their first real domestic success was 1981's *Enter the Ninja,* starring Franco Nero. That was followed by *Death Wish II* in 1982, which made Charles Bronson their unlikely box office hero at an age when most of us are considering retirement. And then, one of the biggest hits Cannon ever had was *Missing in Action*, starring a middle-aged Chuck Norris. Bronson wound up making eight films for Cannon, and Chuck made ten.

By the mid-'80s, they brought in Michael Dudikoff for *American Ninja*, who also made ten movies for the company; and then Jean-Claude Van Damme with *Bloodsport*, which may be the most agreed-upon classic in their catalog. It's probably the best American martial arts movie since *Enter the Dragon*, and it launched Van Damme to stardom. Unfortunately, Cannon was in too bad of shape at that point to capitalize on Van Damme's superstardom in the early nineties.

As far as evolution goes, Cannon followed more trends than created them, but I wouldn't call them rip-off artists—at least in most cases. They

just had their fingers on the same pulses as so many other studios and production companies. You had movies like *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action, Rambo: First Blood Part II,* and *P.O.W.: The Escape* all arriving within the space of a few years, and all with very similar plots. It's not because one was following the others, it's just that POW/MIAs were part of the popular zeitgeist in the early eighties and something that caught the attention of guys like Chuck Norris, James Bruner, Sylvester Stallone, and James Cameron. *Missing in Action* and *P.O.W.: The Escape* were both Cannon films, one coming early in the trend and the other near the tail end of it.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

Cannon was the heart of the genre of action films, by which I mean that commercial production line of mass-produced, entirely routine, sometimes awful, sometimes good "genre" films that make up what a genre really is. Individual films become tentpoles or templates, markers of what a genre is about and what it can do, but like in-between frames in animation, most of what happens between the key frames is what actually gives you the animation. Like MGM churning out musicals, Warners doing gangsters, Universal dragging their monsters through the forties, Cannon was producing the volume that constitutes the output rather than making individual films that were breaking ground or opening up new avenues the way, say, the Eastwood urban Westerns did ten years earlier. I was a teen in the eighties, and Cannon films were like RKO Westerns to my generation—reliable genre fodder you'd rent out and eat up like popcorn.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

The other thing that has to be said is that by the 1980s, we started seeing guys who almost exclusively made action films, at least during those years. Not only that, but they crafted their bodies in ways that made it look like their sole purpose was to exterminate evildoers. Many were monosyllabic because, frankly, they couldn't act *or* had heavy accents, which was fine, because their dramatic talents weren't the focal points of their movies. These guys were some of the first pure "action stars." Many tried to become more rounded-out movie stars later on. Some succeeded, most didn't.

GLEN OLIVER

Action had grown up in the marketplace and was pointedly demonstrating that the genre could be about ideas and emotions as much as bang, bang, shoot ’em up. Cannon’s action—and more importantly, its *ideas*—didn’t evolve concurrently or in a manner commensurate with the marketplace they were in. As such, Cannon films started feeling a bit passé and old hat—and their *shtick* grew less inviting.

HARVEY O’BRIEN

I think *Die Hard* was the apex of the classic era of the action movie. Without wanting to be overly “author” about it, in my book, I argued for the emergence of action as a distinct mode through the 1970s and ’80s out of the Western, war, and crime films, all of which were being reframed and refigured through modern framings and settings. Action was able to take the place of the old genres to an extent, or use their tenets to come up with something slightly new, or at least enough of a variant to change the audience’s perspective. An urban Western is not, in the end, a Western. It’s easier to get audiences into *Dirty Harry* than it would be if it really was set in the West with the sagebrush and spurs. The “urban” isn’t entirely incidental—it speaks to the audience of the time, who had had enough of the iconography of the Western but who were familiar enough with the tropes to be able to enjoy them in a recognizably everyday setting. That period of emergence ended sometime in the mid-to-late 1980s, by which time the formula for what was now something distinctly “the action movie” was then very much in place.

By then, rather than films which asserted this new tonality through a prism of others, we had films made in that mode by design, which happens in all genres. As I noted in the book, the moral panic around *Rambo: First Blood Part II* had totally faded by *Rambo III*, when more than one reviewer merrily joked that the Russians pulled out of Afghanistan because Rambo had arrived. No one took that film in any way seriously, even for the purposes of outrage, whereas just a few years earlier, the moral panic around its predecessor had prompted debate about whether it was moral for an action film to poke at historical wounds like POW/MIA.

★ ★ ★

The seismic shift of action films in America during the 1980s is probably best epitomized by the arrival in 1987 of the late Richard Donner's Lethal Weapon, *starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover and based on the screenplay by wunderkind Shane Black. Then, in 1988, director John McTiernan's* Die Hard, *which introduced Bruce Willis as New York cop John McClane, visiting his estranged wife in California for her office Christmas party, but unexpectedly finding himself having to take on a team of terrorists (led by the brilliant Alan Rickman as the cultured but deadly Hans Gruber) who have taken over the building. One could argue that Keanu Reeves's John Wick was a white-collar descendant of the blue-collar John McClane.*

RICHARD DONNER
(director, *Lethal Weapon*)

I had been looking for a good action project, but because I hadn't really done one before, it was difficult. I had read all kinds of shit; scripts written for violence's sake, which is why those films were being made. I couldn't even get through them. And then this thing came along, and I just fell madly in love with it. I felt it was a departure, and I suddenly wanted to make an action film. I really do not like violent films. I can't look at them. People have said to me that *Lethal Weapon* is really violent, but it's not. It's really an old-fashioned, action-packed film. It's like a good Western. The bullet pierces the heart, and the guy falls dead. It's not that you've spent thousands of dollars to show how you can blow somebody apart. Even towards the end, when Murtaugh is shot and they literally put salt in the wound, we don't focus on the wound. What we are, are illusionists, whether it be for laughter, tears, or action.

When you get something like that, no matter how good you do it, if you are really explicit, you're expressing what *you* see and are imposing on the audience. But if you can bring them to the edge and let them see what they *want* to see, then you get the sickness of the individual rather than having to live up to everybody else's expectations. There are cases where you say to an actor, "Bring the tears to the edge, but don't spill them. Let the audience cry for you. If you cry, you're getting rid of their emotions." And I think it's the same thing with this.

RIC MEYERS

Coming hot on the first gun fu film's heels was *Lethal Weapon* in 1987 and *Die Hard* in 1988. Being American, the directors and stars took a slightly different, but almost equally effective approach. Unlike the Rambos and Commandos, neither Mel Gibson's Martin Riggs nor Bruce Willis's John McClane acted as if it were easy to fire a gun. Each showed refreshing and ingratiating effort, emotion, passion, and compassion with every shot. The Man with No Name, a.k.a. Dirty Harry, a.k.a. Clint Eastwood, used his own hard-learned personal magic in 1992's Oscar-winning best picture, *Unforgiven.* It is one of the few "action," gun-centric films where the audience can easily count every shot fired and clearly see where every bullet went. Try that with a *Rambo* or *Commando* or *Predator* or *Terminator.*

RICHARD DONNER

I knew we had a great relationship between Riggs and Murtaugh, and the actors—Mel Gibson and Danny Glover—were magic, and it would go out and be a strong picture. I think that the secret of the buddy pictures start with the old formula of two guys diametrically opposed, who gradually get to like each other and eventually pull for each other. It's that spirit of it that works. The reason they work is that the characters come off so human with a sense of humor. And then with Mel being so vulnerable in the beginning, it makes it even stronger.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

Mel Gibson was a great physical actor who could do all his stunts. I worked on stunts on a few of his movies, and that guy could do *everything*, so he's just as good as his character. So much of what works about *Lethal Weapon* is just the banter between the guys.

RICHARD DONNER

As a director, you're directing traffic. You're taking an actor who reads that script and is going to play that script as that character. He's seeing that picture *through* that character's eyes. Then you've got the other actor, and he's seeing it through *his* eyes. You have two pieces of subjectivity that may have no connection whatsoever. Now follow it all through your eyes and

think you're being objective. It's the best part of the game, really, because you're taking all these wonderful people and all their thoughts and trying to channel it down to one … It's a good business.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

And then there was *Die Hard.* I mean, *Die Hard* is one guy kind of stuck in a single locale, taking on multiple people. How many kids dream of that stuff? But at the end of the day, action, to me, is never as good without a good story. I'm an action person, but it becomes generic action when you don't have stakes or anything real involved with the character. Like, what's his motivation? Why do they do these things? At the end, it still comes down to good story, good acting.

LARRY TAYLOR
(author, *John McTiernan: The Rise and Fall of an Action Movie Icon*)

McClane definitely paved the way, but *John Wick* takes the mythology beyond reality. There may be more of later McClane in Wick than the early version. *Die Hard* absolutely changed the trajectory of traditional action. Bruce Willis was just a dude, his biceps were like your dad's. It was a change from Stallone and the *Commando* version of Schwarzenegger, more accessible, so more inviting in a sense to audiences.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

I grew up on eighties genre stuff, so I watched all those Chuck Norris movies, the Hong Kong and Stallone movies, Schwarzenegger movies. And they were all action stars. You had Stallone and Schwarzenegger, then you have Chuck Norris. There were these movies just dedicated to action; the big action spectacle where a lot of it was driven by the action as opposed to the story. You had so many of them back then and more choices to watch, I guess. I feel like now they do have huge action movies, but it's like you don't have the one main action guy like you used to.

BRUCE WILLIS
(actor, "John McClane," *Die Hard*)

Die Hard is probably the closest I've ever come to showing what is in my heart on-screen. I really wanted to play a vulnerable guy. I didn't want

to be a superhero. I didn't want to be one of these larger-than-life kind of guys that nobody really knows. These films are about an ordinary guy thrown into extraordinary circumstances. I wanted to play a guy that people know, who is subject to the frailties of human life.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

Die Hard was the fork in the road for action pictures. Conceptually, it was a gear change, whereas up until then, the action films had for the most part been near-superhuman hero of legendary capability—be it James Bond or Rambo—who is told, "Here's your mission. We're sending you here, there, hither, and yon." It was always about the great hero going on the epic journey, the classic Herculean epic. Westerns are like that, and so are most of your action movies. They're all about journeys and travel and going to strange lands and killing people there. McClane was a hero who *didn't* have a reputation that preceded him. He's just an ordinary guy. That was a real refreshing change. Not that we haven't had ordinary-guy movies for a long time, but we hadn't had them blended with the hyperbolic action movie.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Remember the poster of Liam Neeson for *Taken,* and everyone was like, "Who?" Or, "*Die Hard?*" When you think of *Die Hard* as being such a classic, the truth is that it's almost impossible to emulate, because the camera goes away from John McClane for chunks of time. That's because they had to shoot around Willis's *Moonlighting* schedule. You spend time with the FBI, with the cop, far more with the bad guy than you ever did with the movies that had come before. And Alan Rickman had a weirdness to him, an unsettling kind of calm that you loved. When they shut down the electricity for the city block and the safe opens, and it's *BAM, BAM, BAM, BOOM, BOOM,* everyone in the audience is like, "Where am I? What *am* I watching?" *So* good.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

McTiernan had a kind of clarity in approach which was neither overly pretentious nor campy and yet which was able to achieve the tone of epic and allow tongue in cheek without toppling the film over into bloat or self-parody (until that was his intention—*Last Action Hero*). To me, there

seemed a measure of comfortableness in his major films that I guess you could say grew out of the fact that the action movie was reaching its eighties apex. McTiernan's *Nomads* isn't at the races, but with *Predator, Die Hard,* and *Hunt for Red October,* he was able to make sincere, honest action films which offered fun without condescension and scale without excess. In some ways, *Die Hard* was the apex of that, and afterwards, other films tried to out–Die Hard *Die Hard,* and the result was both excess and condescension.

LARRY TAYLOR

McTiernan was heavily influenced by the European style of Truffaut, having studied *Day for Night* in film school an entire semester. And he applied that sense of patient storytelling to kinetic action thrillers that allowed these movies to breathe and feel authentic. He was also focused on the orientation of characters on the screen, always having them play off one another and in the space in which they inhabited.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

McClane went from the typical big action hero to more of an everyman so that people could identify with him more. Back then, it was Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and those guys, who all had the physique, like comic book guys. But *Die Hard* had a guy who was more normal, everyday, and *became* a hero. That just made people identify with him more.

BRUCE WILLIS

John gave me a lot of time on the original to find the character of John McClane and make it work as an actor. More than anyone else I've worked with, John uses the camera to tell a story; the camera becomes another character in the film.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

McTiernan has commented on his own on-screen violence and seemed turned off by it. Maybe he had become frustrated with the expectation of explicit violence and the extent to which it could shift the balance away from action storytelling towards graphic spectacle (on a body level). I mean, who could forget the bloody feet in *Die Hard,* though it is drawn

from the novel—“human meat,” as [Roderick] Thorp called it? None of the subsequent films have anything like that level of graphic detail, although *Die Hard 2* had a higher body count. He was happy enough dealing in a world of violence, or where violence is the answer—that which gives you agency, but that raises a deeper question about whether or not the representation of violence needs to come with explicit imagery of bloody bodily injury.

This brings us back to the old [Sam] Peckinpah approach and the argument that you need to see it to really understand it, and that can be true. There are films, including Peckinpah’s, where each impact from a bullet has emotional weight, and the consequence is pain and death with meaning. Tarantino gave us that in *Reservoir Dogs*—that sense of the slow, painful death from a bullet wound that Tim Roth’s character is suffering. But for many years and decades, violent acts as narrative and as spectacle didn’t necessarily ask to be taken seriously—the one-punch knockout, the guy who clutches his gut and falls out of shot—as just a point of plot. In *Die Hard,* McTiernan used bloody violence to remind us of how fragile and human McClane was—that he was, in Thorp’s words again, “human meat underneath and in both physical and existential pain.” Maybe McTiernan wanted to back away from that level of depth in representing violence and come back to simpler action storytelling, where violence is part of the furniture.

JOHN McTIERNAN
(director, *Die Hard*)

What we were trying to do is make the film fun for the audience. It’s like trying to fashion an amusement park ride. I can’t claim to have any higher moral intentions than that. You pay your money, have a good time, and come out feeling good.

HARVEY O’BRIEN

Die Hard, which lands just after *Rambo III* and has just enough tongue in cheek to defuse accusations of self-parody, but which delivers without excessive irony, seemed a kind of high point for the genre—fusing the disaster movie mode with action in a very particular way that both upped the stakes and took the action movie to the top floor. In a lot of ways, it

distilled the collective protagonists of the classic disaster films into a single character, which chimes nicely with that strain of strong individualism proffered by so many of these films. Though there are other people who have significant roles, most of the real agency is given to McClane (albeit a panicked, reactive, reflexive agency). There's always ultimately some kind of leader figure in disaster films, but there are usually sub-narratives and some of the "false heroes" (to use that old Campbellian chestnut) die. In *The Poseidon Adventure,* even the actual hero dies.

RODERICK THORP
(author, *Nothing Lasts Forever,* basis of *Die Hard*)

I thought *The Towering Inferno* was a typical Irwin Allen spectacular, a vertical *Poseidon Adventure.* After seeing that movie, I went home and dreamt about a bunch of bad guys chasing a good guy through a high-rise building. That woke me up, and I did something that I almost never do: I made notes. In the novel, violence begets more violence, and the desire for control always ends in failure. There's a moment from the novel that's missing from the movie. After McClane's gotten through the window, he lands on the body of the first guy he killed. It was supposed to be this journey into the underworld.

RIC MEYERS

I don't consider *Die Hard* a shift in the genre; I consider it an all-too-fleeting oasis. The thing I felt made *Die Hard* work better than virtually all the others of its kind is that it allowed the protagonist to show effort, emotion, passion, and compassion—even in the heat of battle. Subsequent sequels, and the majority of action movies since, have eschewed until most are now physiology-free video game characters, feeling no real pain and showing no honest emotions. Sad to say, those essential ingredients rapidly disappeared in subsequent "Lethal Die Weapon Hard" sequels, and even John Woo and Chow Yun-fat wound up being pecked-apart American studio ducks in the following years. In fact, *The Replacement Killers,* which was released in 1998, is a textbook example of how Hollywood copies all the style, but sucks all the substance out of something they "homage." But too bad, Tinseltown. The dirty deed was already done. Gun fu was born, and while many did their damndest to dilute it, it remained a potent package

that simply waited for the right people to come along and use its audience-galvanizing power wisely.

★ ★ ★

"It's like Die Hard *on a…"*

That was the pitch used by dozens of Hollywood writers in the aftermath of that film's successful release. And studio executives responded, green-lighting a wide array of high-testosterone movies that relied on the concept of an everyman hero trapped in a confined space with bad guys and their hostages. Beyond four sequels to Die Hard*, there were films like* Speed *(*Die Hard *on a bus), Under Siege (*Die Hard *on a battleship),* Passenger 57 *(*Die Hard *on a plane),* Cliffhanger *(*Die Hard *on a mountain),* Air Force One *(*Die Hard *on the president's plane),* Under Siege 2: Dark Territory *(*Die Hard *on a train),* Sudden Death *(*Die Hard *in a sports stadium),* The Rock *(*Die Hard *in Alcatraz), and* Speed 2: Cruise Control *(*Die Hard *on a cruise ship). And much to the amusement of many a studio executive, writers began inadvertently bringing things full circle with pitches of "It's* Die Hard … *in a building."*

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

There had been movies before where the ordinary guy becomes a hero, but they were small pictures. Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* is a good example. In *Straw Dogs,* Dustin Hoffman plays a professor who defends his house against these people who have raped his wife. It's very claustrophobic and very psychological. And it was a terrific picture. Now, instead of defending your little house in the English countryside, it's a skyscraper. With *Die Hard*, we joined these two different kinds of movies. We have the small, ordinary, accessible hero—which is almost the opposite of what a hero should be, if you look it up—and brought Hercules home to face the trials and labors of the unknown, forbidden, uncharted areas of the map right here.

J. F. LAWTON
(screenwriter, *Under Siege*)

It’s appealing for moviegoers to see a seemingly ordinary guy use or rediscover special abilities when faced with a difficult situation. If you look at *Speed,* the guy is a member of SWAT, which integrates him into the story in a very nice way. If you look at *The River Wild*—which you could say is *Die Hard* on a river—you’ve got a closed encounter on this river, and Meryl Streep is the one with the special skills she can use against the bad guys. In *Die Hard,* he’s a cop; in *Passenger 57,* he’s an airport security agent; and in *Under Siege,* he’s a former Navy SEAL busted to cook. That part of the storytelling is key.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

Also key is that it’s one man going up against a formidable but known enemy. When you send James Bond off on his mission, there’s no real clear delineation of how many people are working for the villain. All those guys in orange jumpsuits … I always wondered where they came from. There are all these guys living in the barracks of a volcano. Do their relatives know where they are? How did they get this job? *Die Hard* is grounded much more in realism. These guys are there to steal the money, and you understand who they are. One of the key elements of *Die Hard* is to let the audience know right up front that there are fifteen bad guys, they’re here, and they’re trying to do a specific thing, so in a way you can anticipate the hero’s journey.

GLEN OLIVER

The similarly skinned films which appeared in the wake of *Die Hard* were certainly exploitative of the “*one man against a gang*” scenario. But, even more so, many of the films utilizing that gag felt like they were more preoccupied with exploring the possibilities of the “action in a bottle” scenario *Die Hard* had so skillfully laid out and executed—rather than directly mimicking *Die Hard* itself. They felt like exploitations of conceits and settings, more than directly aping what had come before. The man-versus-gang similarities amongst them were certainly and legitimately noted, but at the time, those films felt less like *Die Hard* rip-offs and more like, *“Oh, look, there’s another action movie set in a locked-down environment!”* Which is a rip-off in its own special way, I suppose.

LARRY TAYLOR

Those other films were financially motivated for sure, but the setup is fertile ground. Set your movie star against bad guys in a single setting, and you can churn out a fairly passable thriller. The closest any rip-offs ever got to successful was probably *Sudden Death*, because director Peter Hyams gets it.

GLEN OLIVER

The only one of the *Die Hard* "inspired" films to achieve legitimacy in its own right was *Speed*—a hugely effective and entertaining film which holds up to this day. Jan de Bont brought a filmmaking bravado most similar films simply lacked. The chemistry between Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock was charming and involving and—most importantly—felt natural. The immediacy of the crisis on the bus set against the urban wasteland sprawl of Los Angeles was compelling. There were a lot of things going on in that movie—no matter what role *Die Hard* played in its actualization, *Speed* holds its own and remains legitimate filmmaking and storytelling.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

The reason that the premise, or basic idea, works over and over again is the same reason that the great heroic myths endure. Going back to when they would tell the story of Hercules around a campfire, everyone knew how it was going to turn out, but everyone wondered, "How is it going to be told this time?"

GLEN OLIVER

John McClane—especially in the earlier *Die Hard* films—was a relatively unique pattern for an action hero. I think it would be possible to find some of McClane's qualities in previous on-screen leads; for example, whenever I watch a *Die Hard* movie, McClane being essentially a hard-boiled Buster Keaton often springs to mind. But, on the whole, I think Bruce Willis and company set the gold standard for action heroes whose heads we could get into. As magnificently made as the original *Die Hard* was, and as fun as the first couple of sequels were, the accessibility of McClane was a major contributor to their success. His in-action

expostulations, his stream-of-consciousness mini-monologues, all of the little personality quirks and reactions which gave us insight into who and what he was very much informed our perception of him as a “hero.” And when we got to know him? He really wasn’t that different from the vast majority of us. Hence he was accessible, and his reactions and acknowledgments of the goings-on around him rendered the circumstances he was in—no matter how dopey they may’ve been at face value—more credible as well.

STEVEN E. DE SOUZA

We had a unique challenge with *Die Hard 2*, which was to keep McClane human and fallible, because he had accomplished the near impossible in *Die Hard* and the audience was now expecting it of him. So we had to have him fail in the middle of the movie, being unable to stop a plane from crashing, resulting in the death of hundreds of people. The audience was *stunned*, because that’s not the kind of thing that’s supposed to happen. The studio executives were very nervous and felt the audience would hate McClane. I said, “No, they’ll love him, because he tried.” He’s *not* Superman. There’s no way he can stop the plane from crashing. But he feels so guilty that he becomes the guy from the first movie again, a man against impossible odds. We had that excess baggage from the first movie, because he did all those amazing things. We had to overcome that, because the audience is confident, and you have to make them nervous again.

GLEN OLIVER

McClane’s interesting qualities hardened over as the franchise progressed—he became less accessible as both a character and action persona. He accepted the absurd a little too easily, his responses and actions became increasingly predictable. McClane felt tired and uninvested—and he took the audience and story with him into that sad hole. Which is a chief reason (although far from the only reason) the quality and heart of the franchise drifted as time went on—the series had effectively lost its anchor.

HARVEY O’BRIEN

I think *Die Hard*’s progeny were all riding on the coattails of what had, in many ways, peaked, and it was just a few years before the genre had

moved into adventure spectacle and the years of parody and HK-influenced wire fu and gun fu. When John McClane was swinging off of the jet in *Live Free or Die Hard,* everyone knew this wasn't *Die Hard* anymore, and that was it for most people in terms of the character (I know people who don't even acknowledge the fifth one even exists … like *Indy 4*…). *True Lies* had already done all this kind of thing with its tongue so far in its cheek that you'd have had to be deluded to think it was the same genre it had been five years earlier. Anyway, yeah, sure, the one-man-army thing predated *Die Hard,* reached an apex with *Die Hard,* and then stayed around with ever-decreasing returns until the superheroes took to the skies. And, sure, *John Wick* is part of the *Die Hard* heritage insofar as the modern action film has such a strong reference point in *Die Hard,* but *John Wick* is also part of a much older strain of hit man films with lone warriors on a mission of vengeance, seen a lot in Eastern cinema and, of course, Melville's *Le Samouraï.* In fact, the very low-key tone (between explosive action scenes) is very much in that Bresson style of close observation of small detail and the rituals of loneliness, and then you move from East-West meditation into Eastern-style heroic gunplay in the John Woo/Park mold. But the audience also expects a bit of scale, and that's the *Die Hard* effect. The result can be that it goes too far and you end up with too much, as I think kind of happened in *John Wick: Chapter 3* myself.

JASON CONSTANTINE

You can certainly say that *John Wick,* while it's drawing from so many influences, one of those is the tropes of the Western certainly. And while this predates the eighties, Asian action cinema has highly influenced American action cinema.

MIKE HOSTENCH

There are several stages in the Asian kung fu film that paved the way for films like *John Wick.* Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is an action fest. Toshiro Mifune actually *stops* a horse that is charging against him. You can see this with your own eyes. The action scenes and stunts at the final battle are mind-blowing even for today's standards. Some critics treat this movie as the absolute masterpiece it is, but emphasize on the excellent drama, forgetting how fast-paced and thrilling it is.

JASON CONSTANTINE

If we go way back, look at the influence that the Western genre had on the samurai genre being made in Japan. You literally had Kurosawa and Western directors in the United States going back and forth remaking each other's stuff. *Seven Samurai/Magnificent Seven.* Then you could argue that the influence of *Seven Samurai/Magnificent Seven* is felt in every mercenary movie that's ever made in the eighties and nineties. You could feel the *Seven Samurai/Magnificent Seven* influence in the first *Expendables* movie. Which *in itself* is a throwback to the early eighties action movies.

MIKE HOSTENCH

The 1960s and 1970s were the glory days of Hong Kong kung fu movies. Jackie Chan in the 1980s with his fusion of modern action and gymnastics martial arts. The late 1980s and 1990s "New Wave of Hong Kong Action Cinema," with choreographers and directors such as Yuen Woo-ping, Donnie Yen, et cetera, and their slick, innovative way of understanding and shooting fight scenes, either period pieces or modern action. The "Hong Kong Heroic Bloodshed Genre" in the 1980s and early '90s. Directors like John Woo, Ringo Lam, Johnnie To, and even Wong Kar-wai (watch his first movie, *As Tears Go By*) took gangster violence to a next level with their Sam Peckinpah–inspired/Jean-Pierre Melville–spirited unforgettable poetic hemoglobin-drenched movies.

JASON CONSTANTINE

Look at how the Wachowskis knew absolutely very early what they were doing. Intentionally drawing on Asian action cinema and putting it right at the heart of *The Matrix.*

RIC MEYERS

This groundbreaking combination of a science fiction film and superhero epic was revolutionary and revelatory at the same time. It also literally combined kung fu and gunplay (including the now-famous "bullet time" effect) to fashion the purest gun fu so far achieved in the Western world. Just a shame that it ended there, as the sequels dropped the ball rather egregiously.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

My personal experience walking into the theater and seeing *The Matrix* was as an anime fan. I didn't get into Hong Kong action films until I moved to New York City and had better access to them than I did in rural Ohio. With *The Matrix*, I remember being so impressed by how it created a believable cyberpunk world for the first time in a live-action space. It wasn't the first to attempt it by any means, but most of the movies that came before it—I'm thinking of stuff like *Lawnmower Man* and *Virtuosity*—were pretty cheeseball. On the other hand, I was able to buy into the world of *The Matrix* just as easily as the ones I loved in animated films like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Akira*, or in the William Gibson novels I was devouring. It was the first time, for me, where the technology and special effects were able to rise up to the premise.

MIKE HOSTENCH

The martial arts sequences and shots in *The Matrix* were all designed by Yuen Woo-ping. Keanu Reeves's iconic phrase "I know kung fu" impacted in the nineties generation of young moviegoers as Bruce Lee's trademark fighting-cries did in the seventies. The *Kill Bill* saga was also extremely influential in films like *John Wick.* Quentin Tarantino, himself inspired by the Hong Kong and Japanese masters, created a postmodern marvelous ecosystem of violence that left in awe all action buffs and cinema savants the same.

JASON CONSTANTINE

What's interesting is that as soon as you have these movies, when people are imitating or referencing those movies, some of them aren't always even aware what the source was. Was the source Asian? Was it a samurai movie? Was it a Western movie? Was it a kung fu movie?

MIKE HOSTENCH

Another part of it was the action films were that of the "New Korean Cinema." In 1999, Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri* made the whole film industry realize there was a new hotbed for modern action in South Korea. A superslick, North-versus-South spies, ultraviolent story, this film has all the human drama, emotional intensity, and lead-led action that made this Korean

subgenre so popular in festivals and film markets. In *Shiri*, you can also find *all* the Korean faces now so popular worldwide two decades later: Choi Min-sik (*Oldboy*), Kim Yun-jin (*Lost*), Song Kang-ho (*Parasite*), Han Suk-kyu (*The Berlin File*).

Actor and martial arts master Jung Doo-hong is behind a big chunk of this two-decade wave of Korean action, designing and choreographing dozens of them, including such recent milestones as Jung Byung-gil's *The Villainess.* Mr. Jung owns and directs one of the best film-stunt academies in the world, the Seoul Action School for Stuntmen (right by the border with North Korea), with a strong percentage of female pupils. In my opinion, the closest relative *John Wick* has in Korea is *The Man from Nowhere,* the superb revenge movie Lee Jeong-beom directed in 2010. A rock and roller of a movie. And finally, the recent wave of Indonesian action, with Gareth Evans as the director/deity and Iko Uwais, Yayan Ruhian, and Julie Estelle as their fighting prophets. Evans took the hand-to-hand/man-to-man action drama to a level *never* seen before and setting the standards of *how* a martial arts scene has to be shot. Also, Timo Tjahjanto, known for his excellent horror movies, recently directed fabulous extreme action movies such as *The Night Comes for Us* and *Headshot*, also starring Julie Estelle.

DAVID LEITCH

Even before I started doing stunts, I was a fan of Hong Kong cinema, and it's weird, I guess, for a kid from Wisconsin being a fan, but going to the video store and scouring the bottom shelf to find Jackie Chan movies was incredible. *Police Story* and *Armor of God* are two of my favorite action films. If you look at them, most of the stunts in the '90s and early 2000s were sort of pirated from what Jackie had already done. You also have to look at *The Bourne Identity* which is a reinvention of the genre at that time in 2002.

★ ★ ★

In 2002, director Doug Liman's adaptation of Robert Ludlum's page-turner The Bourne Identity *about an amnesiac super-soldier, which had previously been adapted to much less success, gets reinvented for the aughts and*

transformed the conventional action film again in the most dramatic break with tradition since The Matrix *and would shape the approach of filmmakers for the next decade. Even the James Bond films would themselves begin to emulate the hyperkinetic, quick-cutting montage of the* Bourne *movies, which was further refined by its sequel,* The Bourne Supremacy*, directed by Paul Greengrass.*

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

With *The Bourne Supremacy* period, it was that disheveled kind of three seconds and cut, three seconds and cut, three seconds and cut, with a multitude of angles that weren't filmed. It was like there was no screen direction, and it was, like, poke in the neck, pain in the throat, thrown on the floor, but you can't see what's happening. There's just too much going on there. It's just bullet point, bullet point, bullet point with no information. I used to call it "fight choreography for the ADD." I think they do that because the actors don't train hard enough, didn't train for the choreo, and didn't rehearse a lot. They show up and it's like, "Okay, we'll make this work. We'll just shoot it all with the double. We'll shake the camera. We'll be all over the place. They'll never know who's doing it." That's a way to do it, but that's not what's going to be cool. At the end of the day, it's not going to be memorable. Like, can you remember anything cool from *Quantum of Solace*? There was the great sequence with the free-running in *Casino Royale,* but then from *Quantum*? Nothing memorable.

DAVID LEITCH

I worked on a couple of the *Bourne* films and doubled Matt Damon on *Bourne Ultimatum. The Bourne Identity* changed the way people saw not only action but the spy genre. You had someone who was really empathetic and grounded, and someone who is a victim of the system and *then* reels against it. It just hit at a time and place that resonated with people, and the way that they shot the action was refreshing at the time. Even Bond got in on that with *Casino Royale* and, especially, *Quantum of Solace.* Somebody sort of breaks the mold and hits the jackpot on what's really going to resonate in the zeitgeist, and then everyone jumps on.

J. J. PERRY

For us action guys, there were a couple of moments for me that were significant since I started in 1990. Chad Stahelski and I worked in Hong Kong quite a bit. I worked with a lot of the Chinese action directors before they came to America on *The Matrix.* And Chad worked with them on *The Matrix.* There was this big Chinese wave after *The Matrix* with all of the wirework and kung fu. But then the next significant moment for me was *Ong-Bak* starring Tony Jaa. Tony Jaa's a Thai action star. It was a million-dollar budget movie with no wirework and no visual effects, but this Thai boxer kid with amazing athleticism is kicking the stuntpeople full blast in the face. He's just knocking people out and they're filming.

★ ★ ★

Despite the Hollywood-ization of the action genre, some of the most interesting action films of the era were still being made on shoestring budgets out of Hong Kong, Thailand, and, in the case of Gareth Evans's groundbreaking The Raid, *Jakarta, Indonesia.*

DAVID LEITCH

With *Bourne,* we were in this moment in time where the style of martial arts was changing. I happened to be there when martial arts became really relevant in Western cinema, and then I was there in a couple of spots when it changed and was part of that. The other was *300,* and I think what Zack Snyder was trying to do with the style of action and super-heightened, sort of comic book style, playing with reality, and the sword fights, was just showing you that you don't have to put things in a box. You *can* take these big risks and make things look different, and the only time that you can change the mold is when you take a big risk. Not unlike what we tried to do with *John Wick* in these longer takes or what I tried to do with *Atomic Blonde,* where we made this crazy heightened world of '89 Berlin and then tried to do this incredibly long sequence with Charlize Theron. You make bold choices, and *that's* how you change a genre.

Another movie that did it really well, but didn't have huge commercial success, but affected people, was *The Raid.* No one had seen martial arts that way in Western cinema in a long time, even though it's sort of a genre

film made in Indonesia, but it crossed over and affected people. Another movie I think that was hugely impactful, for me, that's not a Western film or a film I worked on, was *Ong-Bak.* Watching Tony Jaa perform and just realizing that raw human talent is probably the most important ingredient in anything that you do, whether it's just acting or it's action. If you have someone who can pull it off, you can put the camera *anywhere.* And in *Ong-Bak,* it's like these wide shots. They're on sticks, they're not even on a dolly, and he's kicking somebody in the head, and you're like, "That is the most amazing thing I've ever seen." It's like when you're watching Jack Nicholson deliver a monologue, and it's just *talent.* It might be direction in terms of picking the moment or giving the inspiration, but it's raw talent. *That's* the most important ingredient.

J. J. PERRY

Ong-Bak proved that you didn't need a hundred-million-dollar *Matrix* budget to make badass action. You just need to be clever about how you film things and frame it up correctly. So this was a significant moment for me as an action movie. We all came up on Bruce Lee in the seventies, Jackie Chan in the eighties, Steven Seagal towards the end of the nineties, and then Van Damme. I think Van Damme and Seagal muddied the water. I didn't care for their movies, and I didn't like their style, but they did well, because they were Western stars that were good-looking and had bigger budgets, bigger studios pumping them with a whole big-budget machine. And then *The Matrix* hit, which changed everything on a dime. The Hong Kong style, or the Chinese stock, came to America, and I was glad to see it.

RIC MEYERS

To this day, I don't know if I was the first person to coin the name "gun fu." I may have been the first to use it in print as an editor and columnist for *Inside Kung-Fu* magazine, but really, I defy any fan not to have immediately thought of the term after seeing *A Better Tomorrow,* its 1987 sequel, and Woo's follow-ups, *The Killer* (1989), *Bullet in the Head* (1990), and *Hard Boiled* (1992). Woo told me that he had merely replaced the swords of his emotional 1979 wuxia ("heroic chivalry") film, *Last Hurrah for Chivalry,* with guns, and that made all the difference. Suddenly, the gun, like the sword, became an emotional part of the user. And then there was

his star/muse, Chow Yun-fat. A few years later, the actor and I discussed his performance, where he made it clear that he never pulled the trigger as if it were easy. With every bullet fired, you could see fear and power fighting on his face.

★ ★ ★

In the wake of thousands of low-budget, uninspired, direct-to-video actioners, it's easy to forget that the action film has endured over the decades as a uniquely cinematic genre because of the auteur practitioners who have brought an artistry that distinguished its quality over the years. Perhaps no filmmaker has elevated the genre of action to art more so than the legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa with such films as The Seven Samurai, Yojimbo, The Hidden Fortress, *and, later,* Ran, *his late-period adaptation of* King Lear.

RIC MEYERS

Although there were many fine craftsmen in the Japanese film industry, Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) elevated them all by bringing cathartic artistry to the chambara genre—communicating to anyone who saw his action films how the samurai considered their swords not just as killing tools but as extensions of themselves, which created a firm foundation upon which gun fu could be built. His classic *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* begat *The Magnificent Seven* and the Man with No Name spaghetti Western series—all of which translated powerful, personal sword action into kinetic gun action, setting the stage for all the gun fu that followed.

An often overlooked or ignored ingredient that makes the gun fu genre special are the holders of the weapon and how using the weapon affects them. The best gun fu is a balance between the gun and the gunman, as well as how they interrelate. The master of showing that by guiding unforgettably nihilistic warriors was Kenji Misumi (1921–1975), the soft-spoken, self-deprecating cinematic craftsman who might not have been capable of Kurosawa's genius but was capable of anything. Although there was a fistful of fine Japanese action film directors, Misumi stood out by shepherding the best, and first, installments of several of the most powerful and influential samurai film series—including *Zatoichi: The Blind*

Swordsman, Lone Wolf and Cub, and *Son of Black Mask* (who appears to be a direct ancestor to John Wick in look, attitude, and behavior). Misumi's artistry is on full display in what remains my favorite samurai film of all time, *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons,* the fifth in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series, whose every frame is superlative.

★ ★ ★

However, if there's a true spiritual forefather to the gun fu genre, it must be the late, great Western director Sam Peckinpah, whose 1969 classic from Warner Bros., The Wild Bunch*, pushed cinema to a new level in the wake of the end of the Hays Code and the freedom the new ratings system provided in the late sixties and whose subsequent films such as* Straw Dogs, The Getaway, *and* Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia *would push the limit of what was considered acceptable violence in mainstream cinema even further.*

RIC MEYERS

Sam Peckinpah was the man who made screen gunplay a masterpiece of splatter art in the seminal *The Wild Bunch*, which splashed the screen with lead-torn blood in sustained ways that had hitherto only been momentarily hinted at in the execution climax of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967. It was as if the director, who had worked his way up the entertainment ladder in TV Westerns, wanted to make up for all the sterile, bloodless, glamorized movie gun deaths of the previous sixty-six years in the space of 145 minutes. But like Sergio Leone before him, he was not going to waste the effect with just an artless orgy of torn limbs and rended flesh. Like Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, he had his antiheroes—remnants of a disappearing era—flail about against their inevitable end, getting it as badly as they gave it, using all the skills of the cinema to create a true guilty pleasure. It opened the floodgates, and from that moment on, all gunplay bets were off.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

American film theorist David Bordwell points out that though people assume that rapid cutting and frantic action come from the East, really

because Hong Kong action stars performed their own stunts and pretty much took their chances with insurance, the relentless bustle in editing in nineties U.S. films is because they're trying to compensate for not being able to really show frantic action. Instead, they cut around it and mix stunt double action, close-ups, and explosions conducted from a safe distance under all applicable safety regulations to try to replicate the feel of the unfettered HK style. Yes, in time, Western films began to use performers who could actually do real martial arts stunts, but still there had to be some restraints based on insurance needs, so the style of American films emulating the East was a kind of pale echo. There was a compensation in the form of, as I said before, bigger budgets and so bigger explosions and bigger production design, but it also came with bigger close-ups on actors being paid a lot of money and a painful overuse of slo-mo. Sure, Peckinpah used it, and it was used to emphasize spectacle before the eighties/nineties trope became tiresome, but somehow no one was able to use slo-mo quite like John Woo.

RIC MEYERS

Truly the father of what is now known as gun fu, John Woo Yu-sen, born 1946, is a soft-spoken auteur who cut his cinematic teeth on Hong Kong television, then helmed comedies, historicals, romances, wuxia, and even an early Jackie Chan kung fu film (*Hand of Death*) before writing, producing, and directing the action thriller *Heroes Shed No Tears* in 1986, which etched the schematic for his groundbreaking *A Better Tomorrow*, which was released later that same year. *Heroes Shed No Tears* established the sweaty, highly emotional, extreme nature of the predominantly gun action, but *A Better Tomorrow* went one step further—replacing the swords, hands, and feet of kung fu with literal firepower without changing the emotional connection the fighters felt. The result, before his artistry was diluted by his move to Hollywood in 1993, was an energy audiences had not experienced before.

MIKE HOSTENCH

John Woo started directing period kung fu movies in the late seventies, like *Hand of Death* starring a young Jackie Chan and the absolutely marvelous *Last Hurrah for Chivalry.* Woo transplanted the chivalry

swordplay and kung fu stories to the 1980s Hong Kong gangster universe with the seminal *A Better Tomorrow,* starring Chow Yun-fat and Ti Lung, the first coming from being a matinee heartthrob and the latter a superstar of the Shaw Brothers kung fu and swordplay portfolio. After the massive success in Asia of these movies, he directed *The Killer,* produced by another iconic figure of Hong Kong: Tsui Hark. *The Killer* was the film that put the new Hong Kong action cinema on the map, making a big impact on future filmmakers from Mainland China (Zia Hang-ke) to the U.S. (Quentin Tarantino). Then came other milestones of the genre, like *Hard Boiled* and Ringo Lam's *City on Fire*, the inspiration of *Reservoir Dogs,* and *Full Contact*, all starring Chow Yun-fat, who shared the spotlight with other Hong Kong big names like Simon Yam, and even former Shaw Brothers Studio kung fu stars like Taiwanese actor Kuo Choi. So the kung fu connection with the new HK action cinema was always there.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

He seemed to have a good instinct for what needed emphasis, possibly based again on his sense of what's important outside the act of action but important to the emotion of it. Yeah, Ringo Lam was another one brought over during the HK exodus, and in his own way, Ang Lee was part of it, though he didn't go gun fu. The turn to the East was certainly palpable, fueled by political change in Hong Kong and the often temporary self-exile of HK practitioners (eventually lured home in many cases), and it was a question of trying to find a way to capture the dance-like rhythm of classic wuxia and the armed variety that came from it. Fundamentally, that style-versus-style—action-reaction-blow-block—dance you see in the old Shaw Brothers films and the like is putting the emphasis on those beats as an exchange of views—techniques in conflict expressing history, ancestry, training, and skill. Speeding them up was part of what made Chan important, and he was, of course, drawing on classic silent comedy, as is well known, finding ways to pace the ritual that were both thrilling and comical. When gun fu emerged, those kinds of interpersonal actions—hand to foot—were shifted onto gunplay, but in Woo, again, the emotions behind each image were still consistent with having something to say about character.

RIC MEYERS

Finally, after a twenty-four-year gestation, the birth of the genre came in 1986. I was in Hong Kong, celebrating the publication of my pioneering book on martial arts movies, when I was introduced to the soft-spoken, unassuming director named John Woo and shown the poster for the movie he made that was premiering that very night. It was called *A Better Tomorrow,* and the poster made it look like some sort of comedy-drama about high school teachers. Given that he had signed the poster for me, I figured I should see the movie even though I would normally choose a kung fu film to watch. I began to suspect that something was up when even the staff of the film company he worked for couldn't find a showing in the entire city that wasn't sold out. Finally, at the very last, specially added, showing all the way on the other side of Hong Kong island, they found me a seat. I quickly discovered that it *wasn't* about high school teachers. Seeing *A Better Tomorrow* on opening night remains one of the greatest experiences of my movie-watching life. In ninety-five minutes, I watched the audience change. Having seen hundreds, if not thousands, of kung fu films with international audiences, I had never seen a crowd react the way the normally reserved, even jaded, Hong Kong filmgoers did to this somehow familiar yet totally different experience. I, too, was gobsmacked by its cathartic energy and distinctly remember trying to comprehend its effect by blurting to the studio staffers, "That's not kung fu … That's gun fu!"

J. J. PERRY

I don't know where the phrase "gun fu" came from, though I think it's from John Woo and from *Equilibrium,* which was a big motivation for all of us. But the *John Wick* style is from 87eleven in 2011, and the people who were there when we did it were Jon Eusebio, John Valera, myself, Danny Hernandez, Jackson Spidell, and then later came Eric Brown, the Machado brothers, and [armorer] Taran Butler. And, of course, Chad Stahelski being an action master knew where the cameras should go and how to manipulate them into that style. And I'll tell you, Chad himself probably is the closest one of us to John Wick, because he's great at judo, great at jujitsu, and he's a gnarly fucker that could probably kill you every which way to Sunday with a pencil. *That's* Chad.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

I describe it as balletic violence. It's something that's as brutal as someone shooting someone with a gun, but somehow, the way Woo filmed it, he made it look very elegant in a weird way. It's almost a juxtaposition of the intent and the method, the way he did it. It wasn't just that you shoot, then you cut to another guy in a close-up and he gets shot. Instead, it's everything in the same shot, playing wide. *And* there's the fact that the guns *never* run out of bullets. They never reloaded, and they stayed in wide shots, shooting multiple opponents at the same time. A lot of what we did on *John Wick* was influenced by that. But we also knew the nuances; we had the reloads, because that's what's proper, but John Woo was a big part of my adolescence. Almost every time a movie came out, I waited at the Chinese video store and tried to rent them. He's the one who started that genre, so you have to give him that respect.

RIC MEYERS

With *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986, John Woo took the screen lessons taught to him by kung fu, chambara, wuxia, and Westerns (both the genre and the continent), and decided to up the intensity, melodrama, passion, emotions, and violence until they were a swirl of rolling energy that washed over, and then washed away, the audience. The knowledge that the audience's love of screen firepower had been repressed until that moment may (or may not) have been a happy coincidence. A year later saw the release of *A Better Tomorrow II*, which should have been subtitled *Backfire*, because John Woo did not want to make this sequel. But the original's box office receipts demanded it, so Woo endeavored to overdose the audience with even more explosions of guns and emotions until his cinematic aversion therapy cured them of their bullet lust. Karmically, it backfired, of course, because the world audience lapped it up and howled for more. Wanting to have his cake and eat it, too, Woo crafted 1989's *The Killer,* the tale of a remorseful hit man who accidentally blinds a pretty singer as an homage to Martin Scorsese and [French director] Jean-Pierre Melville—while still cramming in enough gunfights and blacker-than-black humor to choke a horse. Also in 1989, Hong Kong's devil-may-care schlockmeister supreme Wong Jing hit upon a seemingly doubtful idea in the form of *God of Gamblers.* What would happen if the gunslinger of John Woo's heroic

bloodshed films was played by the childlike title character of *Rain Man* (1988)? The stars aligned for the result, which turned out to be inspired, largely because of the participation of Chow Yun-fat and superstar Andy Lau, as well as Jing's devil-take-the-hindmost approach to gun fu action. Many maniacal sequels followed, but none as potent as the original.

A Better Tomorrow is without question, and without doubt, the true beginning of gun fu. What separates gun fu from action movies with guns is the protagonist's emotional connection with his weapons. Just as you can't really separate a samurai from his sword and you simply can't separate a kung fu fighter from his kung fu (even if you take off his arms and legs), the gunman (or -woman) must be seen or sensed as being "one with the gun." That's the difference between Chow Yun-fat in *The Killer* and Chow Yun-fat in *The Replacement Killers.* One is a balance of style and substance (yin/yang, anyone?), the other is all style (and actually pretty poor style at that).

★ ★ ★

But it is The Matrix *that proved to be the most significant film in presaging* John Wick*, both because of its Americanization of Asian gun fu films and chopsocky kung fu but also because it cemented a relationship between its star, Keanu Reeves, and his stuntman, Chad Stahelski, who would go on to codirect* John Wick *with David Leitch.*

RIC MEYERS

The Matrix in 1999 is a groundbreaking combination of a science fiction and superhero epic that was revolutionary and revelatory at the same time. It also literally combined kung fu and gunplay, including the now famous "bullet time" effect, to fashion the purest gun fu so far achieved in the Western world. Just a shame that it ended there, as the sequels dropped the ball rather egregiously. The following year, *Versus* gave us a mash-up of samurai, gun fu, and zombie films that brought the genre full circle, back to its blind swordsman and baby cart roots, while still creating something new, exciting, and unforgettable.

★ ★ ★

The introduction of gun fu would essentially lead to the creation of the John Wick *franchise, with Leitch and Stahelski having formed the company 87eleven to essentially capture exactly what* The Matrix *did with cast members front and center in terms of the action. The company hyperbolically (albeit accurately) describes itself as follows in its corporate press materials: "David Leitch and Chad Stahelski were two stunt performers with a vision. Fast forward to the present, where they're now known for action design and accomplished as film directors, and 87eleven, itself, has grown into an industry-leading company for stunt equipment and facilities rentals and stunt training services."*

Much like how companies like the Thirteenth Floor pre-visualize visual effects and storyboards using elaborate animatics, 87eleven creates, shoots, and edits original stunt sequences that are then pitched straight to a project's director. After being hired on to a film, 87eleven works on getting the film's stars into physical shape and spends the time training them on preplanned fight choreography. When the company began, before both men became A-list Hollywood directors thanks to John Wick, *Stahelski and Leitch would serve on set as the film's stunt coordinators and fight choreographers, and their crew would perform as the stars' stunt doubles as well as henchmen. Some of their many credits include* The Bourne Legacy, Expendables 3, *the* Hunger Games *series,* Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Jurassic World, Wolverine, *and* Dracula Untold *prior to the first* John Wick. *Since the first* John Wick *became a sleeper hit, Leitch directed* Atomic Blonde *and* Deadpool 2 *as well as the forthcoming Brad Pitt film* Bullet Train. *In addition to directing the fourth and fifth* Wick *films, Stahelski is developing the remake of* Highlander.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

I was very fortunate years ago. I was recruited into film at a very young age. I was a competitive martial artist at the time and did a bunch of kickboxing, getting kicked in the head for a lot less money. Turns out, there's a stunt guy out in the audience who was very good and very acclaimed. He asked me if I wanted to be in film. I said sure, and he kind of trained me over the next couple of years. That led me into all kinds of

opportunities. Then we met Keanu on the first *Matrix*, but we all come from that kind of camp, and it was an incredible learning experience. You can't help but be saturated by some great filmmakers.

From there, I got my opportunity to be an action director through Warner Bros. and the people we met. I started directing a lot of the fights and action that led to other opportunities. Next thing, my partner [David Leitch] and I ended up becoming fairly successful second unit directors, working for David Fincher, for Zack Snyder, for Guy Ritchie—some of the biggest action movies on the planet. And that kind of rubs off on you. Now I shoot what appeals to me, and hopefully people like it. I would like to take some of the credit, but it all comes down to the people I work with.

DEREK KOLSTAD

One of the things that has been a blessing of working with 87eleven is that I write out action, and they make it better. So when I saw the first cut of both *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2,* to actually see stuff that I wrote down on the script on-screen but better, makes you happy. I like snapping limbs and kicking in knees and that kind of stuff. I don't know shit about guns. I had to call a lot of people.

J. J. PERRY

Our question was, how do we create something new? Chad got this movie called *Safe* with Jason Statham. Chad left for Philadelphia and New York, where they were going to shoot it. I was going to come out there, and he was going to direct second unit and I was going to coordinate it, but he was going to do the prep coordinating on the East Coast while we did the pre-viz prep on the West Coast. So John Valera, Jon Eusebio, Danny Hernandez, Guillermo Grispo, and myself started mixing the jujitsu that I'd been doing on *Warrior.* They'd been on their own shows with the gun work. So I don't call it gun fu, because, technically, it's *not* gun fu. It's gun-kitsu. When you watch it, there's no kung fu. When you watch the movie *Equilibrium,* you could call *that* gun fu, because it's ambiguous. What we did was we took all of the jujitsu work and sambo work—"sambo" meaning Russian leg lock—but instead of using them for submission, we would use those limbs with one hand to pull us into a transitional move that puts us back on the gun. So basically all jujitsu was done left-handed so you could

shoot right-handed. You can see the *John Wick* movies in there, but Jason didn't want to do any of those moves when we got there. He wasn't feeling that style. He wanted to do more of what he was used to, so we ended up throwing it on the shelf, but it was created, and we all knew it was something new and sick and badass. Chad and Dave got *John Wick* shortly thereafter. They were already haggling for it while we were doing *Safe,* so it was all kind of in the mix.

DAVID LEITCH

When we did the *Matrix* films, my *John Wick* directing partner, Chad Stahelski, was doubling for Keanu Reeves. On the first *Matrix*, I was working on a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie, and Chad called me from Australia and he was like, "You've got to see this film that we're making. We're actually doing these Hong Kong fight sequences with the real actors. Laurence Fishburne and Keanu learned all the choreography, and they're doing it themselves. It's like watching Jet Li and people like him doing a fight." And I was like, "No way." Normally, it's stunt double, close-up of the actor, stunt double, close-up. And sure enough, the movie comes out and it's a hit. Then everybody jumped on the bandwagon, saying, "This is what we want to do. We want to see the actors do the action. We want to see the actors do the fight scenes."

Chad and I formed 87eleven to facilitate that desire people had for the actors to be more involved. Train actors, get them to do the choreography, teach them real martial arts, get them far along in the process so we could actually shoot the action in a compelling way that people wanted. So, *The Matrix* was hugely influential on my career and Chad's. Like the trajectory of martial arts being really relevant in Western cinema, we just happened to be the two geeks that loved martial arts movies and were in the stunt business, and we knew how to make it happen. As a stunt guy, you become a mini-director. You're talking to actors about performance. The way you present a stunt is tied in to the way you photograph it, so you're hanging out with the cinematographers. You learn tricks to make action look more dynamic, having the fight come toward you or shooting on a longer lens to compress the speed.

CHAD STAHELSKI

Honestly, I'm a bit more old-school about how I grew up and the directors I chose to emulate. I'm a two-camera guy for most of it—A and B cameras, and then we'll have a third on standby for inserts or other things. Action's a slightly different thing. For the car chase sequences and stuff, we use a minimum of three, but sometimes we have as many as seven or eight cameras on set in different rigs that you'll have to change over time. We found that early on the actual day, some people have five cameras or three cameras ready to go. We'll call it the three-camera stack, and what happens is, because the cameras are big, when one of them is trying to get the medium shot, one is trying to get Keanu, one is trying to get the other guy, they end up bumping, and you can't get the organic-ness of what you're trying to get. I'd rather have two cameras and do more short takes just to get a little bit more freedom in the camera so they can move. I like a little bit of movement.

J. J. PERRY

If you think of the movies from the eighties, like *Rambo,* they're cool action movies now, and I watch them because I'm nostalgic. But if you were to show them to kids now, it doesn't hold up. Why? Kids play fucking video games now that are *real* … it looks like real life. The target market has changed. They're more educated, they're more savvy. They call bullshit. And they also want instant gratification; this younger generation doesn't have the same attention span. These young kids, they get all of their knowledge from the iPhone, and that knowledge comes quickly, and knowledge that comes quickly that isn't earned comes without wisdom. So they want instant gratification, but they also can YouTube something right away and see if it's bullshit. Like a good hunter or a good soldier, you have to be aware of your target market or your target or the animal you're hunting. You have to know that animal, and you have to know yourself if you're going to bag it.

Part of it is keeping your finger on the pulse of the target market, what they like and love. And I have a menu of people—a bunch of nieces and nephews—that I call back home in Texas, where I'm from. Then there's a bunch of people that live in my neighborhood that I ask that are video game geeks and comic book geeks. So I pressure-test a lot of this stuff; just because I like it doesn't mean it's going to be great. I go out there and I ask

opinions. Back in the eighties, you could get away with a lot more—and it was a lot cheesier. Then in the nineties, it was a bunch of way over-the-top stuff with wirework. And then, after the millennium, we started getting more clever about it, because that's when video games really started taking off and the technology of video games (and the technology of moviemaking) just got better and better. In the *John Wick* movies, there's no muzzle flash or squibs. That's all done in post with visual effects, because if we'd had them live, it would have taken ten more days to film the movie. So just the evolution of technology has a lot to do with the evolution of action movies.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

So much of it is about how you design action. When you look at the Marvel machine, you get all these variables before it gets on-screen. When you work on those films, you really have to bear in mind the visual effects aspect of them. The characters are already set, since they've been around since the forties, fifties, and sixties, so you can't really differ from how they would do things in general. Sometimes it's better to get to do films that are a little bit more grounded and where you're relying on the physicality of the actors. They're doing everything and aren't aided by visual effects or wires. Sometimes those movies are fun to do, because you really have to figure it out and make it look nice. The comic movies are going to look good no matter what, because you have all these other variables that can help. But when it's just *them*, and their physicality versus another person's physicality, it's all about making that action just as dynamic as something in the Marvel movie or *Star Wars* movie.

J. J. PERRY

I don't like watching the Marvel films or the DC films, because you look at them and they turn into cartoons. Half of it is not real. Half of it's CG. That's why I like doing *Fast & Furious* movies and *John Wick* movies—we're on the street going ninety miles per hour, smashing real cars on a location somewhere. For me, *that's* filmmaking, because we come from the nineties, and it's the reality of actually solving the problem in camera. I feel like that art is dying right now. And pretty soon, you won't need to do it. They'll be able to animate cars and animals, people. It's a dying trade. I will

be long gone, bro, before it's over. I'll be retired. I'll be fishing by the time they're done with me.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

After *The Matrix*, you started seeing A-listers doing longer takes and more action pieces. *The Matrix* was the first time you see Westerners do that style of film fighting. I worked on *Bourne* films. When we did that one, it was the same thing. I went in the room, and there are all these execs there, even Matt Damon, and we were trying to make a new style for him. I demoed a bunch of different things, Hong Kong–style things, Jackie Chan–ish things that I grew up on. Then I would do grappling and throwing and wrestling, which is kind of the precursor to *Wick*, but they weren't ready for that style yet. They'd go, "Oh, that looks painful, and it takes too long."

DAVID LEITCH

For the good actors and the committed actors, I think they look forward to it. The fun thing if you talk to actors and all performers, especially in movies, is that every four or five months, you get to play something different or learn a different skill and get paid to do it. So, there's not a lot of actors that complain when you're like, "Okay, they're going to pay you a large sum of money and you get to learn martial arts." Usually, it's the other way around: you have to pay for the lesson, and here you're getting paid to learn. Most are excited, not all—"What? I've got to sweat?"—but most. The good ones put in the time, and they're there to work. They're professional, and they take their job seriously, and those are the people that usually rise to the top.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER
(stunts, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

Having the actor in much more of the actual fight scenes makes it harder for stuntpeople in prep, but easier physically during the show. You're still there emotionally and you're guiding them through it the whole time, so you're still really in it. I actually think it's harder for a stunt double, because we go in there, we train, we perform, we do our thing. For me, if I walk on set and we have a whole fight scene worked out, I can change it at the last minute or I know how to move perfectly to make sure that the

camera catches this hit or that hit. Whereas even if you take six months to train them, it's a little harder for them to get used to it. Unless it's someone like Keanu, who's been doing it for so long.

DAVID LEITCH

87eleven has served us both really well. We started it on the heels of the *Matrix* movies. We had another partner, Damon Caro, when we were the choreographers on *300.* Then it just really took off from there, where we were hired to design action sequences for films, train actors, we were stunt-coordinating films, and we were building up a team of stuntmen to work under us exclusively. The machine still runs, even though Chad and I are now directing, and we have stunt coordinators that work out of our company. And we still have our choreography team. Chad had some of our choreographers on *John Wick: Chapter 2*, and I had some of our choreographers on *Atomic Blonde.* And it's sort of become its own monster in that our choreographers who have trained under us have gone on to have their own careers. They're working on all the Marvel movies—there are very few movies in the action space that haven't been touched by 87eleven's choreography team in some respect. A lot of them are still working with us, or when we're not working on a film and they need to work, they'll go and do their own thing. But it's kind of a family. When we're up and running, they come back, and we're ready to work.

2 LIGHTING THE WICK

"That fuckin' nobody is John Wick. He was once an associate of ours. They call him … Baba Yaga."

In retrospect, the worldwide success of John Wick *doesn't seem that surprising: a high-octane action film top-lined by a bankable international star in Keanu Reeves, veteran of such blockbuster hits as* Speed *and* The Matrix*, and made for a reasonable budget. But success was hardly assured, and its path to the silver screen has been byzantine at best. Throughout its gestation,* John Wick *could have easily fallen apart before it even made its way in front of the cameras, just one of thousands of scripts written but remaining unproduced every year. Almost as bad, it could have never seen the light of a projector bulb and, instead, been consigned to the dustbin of low-rent direct-to-video films or streaming releases.*

But John Wick *did fight its way into existence, punching, kicking, and shooting its way to becoming one of the most legendary and successful action films of all time, beginning as a down-and-dirty draft of a screenplay originally titled* Scorn*. Yet the road to this unlikely success was a long one, requiring a dedicated group of true believers, most notably its star, producers, directors, and the man without whom this unique neo-noir universe would never have come into existence, screenwriter Derek Kolstad. Kolstad was a writer of such low-budget actioners as 2012's* One in the Chamber*, starring Dolph Lundgren, and 2013's* The Package*, with wrestler Steve Austin and Lundgren. Not the auspices one would anticipate the future of action movies being born from.*

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin. When I was a little kid, I was obsessed with film. My parents were, and still are, very conservative, but they realized I loved movies, so when Beta and VHS came out really cheap, my mom would pick up everything that had gone on sale and bring them home. Late at night, PBS would show R-rated movies on the weekends, and I just watched and watched.

I was reading five, six books a week; I loved Dashiell Hammett, Tom Clancy—that's how I taught myself. I grew up reading first and watching movies second. I was the kid at the sleepovers that everyone teased, because I got scared really quick. Then we were on a road trip to Colorado, and my uncle, God rest him, overheard this and said to me, "I've got a book for you. If you can make it to the end, you will never be scared again." And he gave me a first edition of *It* by Stephen King. Scared the *fuck* out of me. But from there on out, *I* was the one scaring the shit out of everyone at the sleepovers.

★ ★ ★

As Kolstad relates it, he didn't know anyone in the business who would help him break in as a writer despite the fact that his aunt Lori Wick is ironically the highest-selling Christian romance author of all time.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Twenty-five million books sold—*that's* the shadow I grew up in. The interesting thing is, I was twenty-six years old and working for Dale Carnegie in Chicago, teaching sales managers how to staff and man their sales teams. But I was still writing between five and eight screenplays a year and then just printing them and putting them on my shelf, because, "Who the fuck am I?" My little brother called me and asked, "How you doing?" And I just started crying—and I'm *not* an emotional guy. I realized at that moment I just had to come out to Los Angeles, but after two months, I was like, "Fuck it, I don't want anything to do with this." But I *still* wrote on and off over the years and Sonya, my wife, who I lovingly refer to as my "script bitch," said at one point, "You should try again." I was working with NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and nonprofits. I was setting up websites and doing marketing and all that kind of stuff. I didn't like it, but it

paid the bills. Then I got a manager, and I wrote *One in the Chamber* and *The Package.*

★ ★ ★

Kolstad, who was a fan of classic movies like Three Days of the Condor *and* The Spy Who Came In from the Cold, *took a crack at another spec. This one was called* Scorn*—which provided the basis for what would eventually come to be known as* John Wick*—and it was during the process of writing it that he discovered his own personal approach to what would become his craft.*

DEREK KOLSTAD

As Sonya will attest to, I drink too much and watch cartoons. *SpongeBob, Rick and Morty, Adventure Time* … holy shit, it's gotta be animated. The other thing, too, is I love old movies, I love silent movies. I say this all the time, but if you want to be a filmmaker in any capacity, track down Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle. You can kind of shrug and say, "The writer of *John Wick,* he's a douchebag saying, 'See these movies,'" and then you'll see them and realize, "Holy shit!" I love Howard Hawks's movies, I love the black-and-white musicals from the twenties, thirties, and forties.

For some stuff, outlining is important. But if you saw my outlines, they're treatments. Or scriptments. And to be honest, I spend most of my time on the first act, because in my head, the third act is the easiest, the second act is the most difficult. If you lock the first act, it's a movie. But the other thing I love is being untethered. I love sitting down and going, "Fade In. Interior … Here we are, where we're going, here we are." Just sprinting. And I have no qualms about just having a day when you write sixteen pages and you say, "Well, that's pretty fun," and then deleting twelve of them because they're not right. But we sprinted. I don't believe that much in a jog. Because in a jog, you get used to your environment, you get used to the action, you get used to the characters, and there's no challenge. You should always be sprinting. For every script I write, I delete two to one.

★ ★ ★

Kolstad wrote the first draft of Scorn *in just four days, inspired by watching a pair of "terrible" revenge movies that he and his wife had rented. That script had a Clint Eastwood–esque John Wick in his early seventies, with a seventeen-year-old dog. His wife had died years ago, but this was still ostensibly the world that would ultimately become* John Wick.

DEREK KOLSTAD

With *John Wick*, I wanted to explore what would happen if the worst man in existence found salvation. Would it be true to his core? And when the source of that salvation is torn away from him, what happens? Do the gates of Hades open? John's the kind of guy who walks into a room and has everything laid out in his mind like a chess game. In the underworld, he's a legend, and he's been away long enough that the young up-and-comers have heard the name, but don't necessarily believe all the stories. And this is definitely *John Wick.* The Continental was there. Charon was there. Winston was there. The coins—all those pieces of the world were there, and the body count was, like, eleven. I think in the first movie it was eighty-four.

★ ★ ★

Despite imagining a John Wick played by Clint Eastwood, several seminal films proved an inspiration during that period for Kolstad in crafting his kick-ass combination of violence and black humor by way of the Coen brothers.

DEREK KOLSTAD

When I was writing the script, I was thinking about *Miller's Crossing* and that scene where Albert Finney takes the cigar out and puts it down. And you're thinking, *Something's coming.* I think that came out in 1990, but I was sixteen and had watched *Raising Arizona* religiously. So when I saw *Miller's Crossing* the first time, I was just kind of stunned and going, "That is not what I was expecting." And to keep revisiting it, it keeps getting better and better. Then I realized that the last five minutes of *Miller's Crossing* wouldn't work if Gabriel Byrne had told Albert Finney what he was up to. And then you have the classic line that you could argue is him

breaking his own rule—or it was part of the long con—when he kills John Turturro's Bernie and goes, "What heart?" And you're just like, "Oh shit! I've rooted for this guy?"

I think what makes these characters, even going back to *Get Carter* and what Paul Newman was to this sort of genre space, is the humor. When Gabriel Byrne talks to her about the dream of him losing his hat? And she goes, "Did you go catch it?" And he goes, "No. Why? There's nothing stupider than a man running after his own hat." If you didn't have those little moments, it wouldn't work as well. Like when Tom owes money to the bookies and he gets punched in the gut, and the enforcer says, "Tell him it's not personal." Like, "Shit, Tom. He knows that." Stuff like that. The humanity makes the levity and the humor all the better.

★ ★ ★

After writing the first draft, his agents at United Talent Agency (UTA) at the time—Mike Goldberg, Josh Adler, and Charlie Ferraro—gave him notes, which he addressed in the next draft. Then, the effort began in earnest to sell the script, which ended up generating considerable interest. At the same time, producer Basil Iwanyk, who had been an executive at Warner Bros. for many years, had established his own banner for the studio, Thunder Road Films. Despite having had big box office success, he still craved the autonomy and excitement of being an independent producer who could green-light his own projects.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

I was an executive at Warner Bros. for a long time. And then I started Thunder Road, which was at Warners for a long time. There was one year where I made *The Town*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Brooklyn's Finest*, and I was broadly involved with *The Expendables.* We had had lunch with one of Stallone's agents, and he said, "Sly has a two-picture deal with Avi Lerner. *Rambo* is the first one, he has to make a second one. Avi has no scripts. Do you have something that's available?" I had this script that I had developed at Warner Bros. called *Barrow.* It was loosely based on *Dogs of War,* a book that I loved, which wasn't available, but we wanted to do current-day

contract killers. Remember, this was a long time ago, right around the time mercenaries turned into private contractors. We developed the script, and Warners put it in turnaround, so we had it back. So we sent them *Barrow.* At that point, I controlled the script; I was a producer. Avi Lerner called me and said, "Sly loves it." Great. I didn't know what the fuck that meant, but great. Then he called again and said, "Sly has this idea of bringing back all these old action stars from the eighties and putting them in the movie." I'm like, "Sounds interesting," but in my fucking pretentious, snooty, big office on the Warner Bros. lot way, I looked down upon it all. Ultimately, they approached me to say, "Sly and I want to bump you to an executive producer," and I was like, "Well, I still want to get paid." So they still paid us, and I never thought anything of it. All of a sudden, I see the announcement that it's going to star Stallone and Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis. It was amazing. It was awesome. And Avi hates cutting me a check on every single *Expendables.* He *hates* it. And I've gotten so much mileage out of *The Expendables,* you can't even imagine. But the irony is, once we developed the script and handed it to Sly, we had nothing to do with it. I tell that to you now, but if I was telling this eight years ago to a financier, I'd be like, "I developed a film with Sly." It's the magic of the movie business.

I remember the day *The Town* opened. It ended up opening at $27 million. So much bigger than any of us expected. It exceeded all our dreams. Saturday morning, I get a call from the studio to congratulate me on *The Town,* and they're like, "Congratulations on *The Town.* Anyway, what's going on with *Wrath of the Titans*?" It literally was seconds of congrats. And I'm thinking to myself, *Fuck. I'm going to be in this tentpole ghetto.* And that's fine, but I need to be able to toggle between two types of movies. So that was when I started to think of, "How do I do it a different way?" Don't get me wrong, I loved working on *Wrath of the Titans* and *Clash of the Titans,* but those films in a lot of ways were constructing a film, rather than making a film—not to sound pretentious. That's when I started thinking there must be another way.

In any case, with Warner Bros., I quickly realized that they wanted more *Clash of the Titans* and less movies like *The Town,* which I totally get. But I also wanted to make movies where I had a greater financial upside, greater creative upside, and I could bet on myself. And have my own

development money and all this other jazz. So I left Warner Bros., raised some independent money through CAA [Creative Artists Agency], and started Thunder Road 2.0. What I wanted to do was be the American EuropaCorp [Luc Besson's successful film production company in France] and make unbelievably cool, slick action movies. And so, I was on the market for action movies. Action movies you could make for $25 million plus or minus five. It's the most obvious thing in the world, but nobody seems to understand that. If you hit the number right, which is not hard to do, your downside's protected, but you still have a tremendous upside.

★ ★ ★

It was that search for elevated action movies that led Thunder Road to John Wick. *But they weren't the only girl at the dance, finding that there were several studios interested in the script at the time, many of which had much deeper pockets than Iwanyk's fledgling company.*

BASIL IWANYK

One of my best friends is Charlie Ferraro at UTA, who sent me this script from Derek Kolstad called *Scorn.* The lead was a seventy-five-year-old man, twenty-five years after being retired. It was the fun of watching Clint Eastwood kick ass. I thought, *Okay, there's probably one or two names you could do with this. Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford. Other than that, I'm not sure how I put this movie together.* But the tone of the script for *John Wick* was subversive and really fun. It had a very clear emotional through line and a great premise for an action movie. As it evolved, *John Wick* became the story of a man who loses his wife, and his home is invaded, his car stolen, and his dog killed.

DEREK KOLSTAD

When I first wrote it, I was just like, "What is the inciting incident?" That thing we hear all the fucking time. Every meeting. And to me, the more you watch that movie, it's like … "Is it the dog? You know? Is it an excuse?" Everyone reads into it in their own way, and I never wanted to take that away from anyone.

BASIL IWANYK

It's a very human premise for a big action movie, something that could happen to anyone. To me, the holy grail of the action genre is to pair a very simple and very accessible premise like this with a hyperreal style, as we did.

MARK DACASCOS
(actor, "Zero," *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I'm not really into action just for the sake of action, although I'll watch it, because I think there's a lot of fantastic athletes out there. And I love interesting choreography. But in terms of a movie, I need the whole picture. My wife encouraged me to watch *John Wick 1* and *2*, and they're great. John is great, the story is interesting, there's heart, and, of course, the action ties together. In the first movie, Wick has lost his wife, he gets this beautiful gift after his wife's death, the gift of a puppy. So you've got that emotional bond to the character. And he loves his car. When you take these things away … Interestingly, it reminded me of *Braveheart*, where, in the first fifteen or twenty minutes, there's not really action. You see Mel Gibson's character lose his family. He has this really nice connection with that little girl who gives him that flower. It kind of reminded me of that, because you get invested in the character.

DEREK KOLSTAD

My agent at the time, Charlie Ferraro, came to me with five offers for the script, and he didn't tell me the first four. He said, "They're huge, but you should really take the lowest-paying one, because they want to make the movie *now.* If you want to have a career as a writer, we should take this." You know you have a good agent when he's looking at the long game. *John Wick* was sold in February, and the movie came out in November. That *never* happens.

BASIL IWANYK

My other best friend in the world, this guy Jimmy Darmody, is an agent at CAA, who at the time represented Keanu. And he said, "Do you have any action movies for Keanu Reeves?" I remember thinking to myself, *Keanu is one of the great action stars of the last twenty-five years—what happened to*

him? What's he been doing? And he was directing his movie, *Man of Tai Chi*, and doing *47 Ronin*. We give him the script, we tell him, "Clearly, you're not seventy-five."

DEREK KOLSTAD

As Sonya will attest, the rewrite was my entire life. But here's what's really cool: Thunder Road picked it up. I worked with Basil Iwanyk and his awesome producer in training Erica Lee for two months, and they sent it off to directors. All the directors who came back—and I'm not going to name names, but they're big directors—were like, "I totally want to do this. Maybe John Wick is married, his mother-in-law lives with him, he has four kids, and they kill the entire family?" And I was like, "You don't get it. We're not doing that." And then suddenly, on Friday at 11:30 A.M., Basil called and was like, "Dude, Keanu just called." And, at the time, I was like, "*Keanu Reeves?*" They couriered a script to him, and he called at 4:30 and was like, "Yeah, I'm going to do this."

BASIL IWANYK

And Keanu goes, "Well, there's things I need to do to make this closer to my own age," and stuff like that. We went through about five or six rewrites. Thankfully, Derek Kolstad is a very fast writer. And then we got to a point where Keanu said, "Let's go make the movie." That's when the madness started.

KEANU REEVES
(actor, "John Wick")

Basil brought the script to me with the idea that I would be a part of such a great collaboration. We all agreed on the potential of the project. It has this character of John Wick, but then you also have the real world, and at the same time this kind of underworld. This den of thieves that have this honor and a code. It had this emotional connection with John Wick, who's grieving, who's lost the love of his life and has this mythical dark past. And I loved the quest that he goes on to reclaim his life. And then the world he moves through to do it.

DEREK KOLSTAD

We had talked internally about actors, but it was Keanu Reeves—a voracious script reader; anything he gets his hands on, he reads—who got his talons into it and made it his own. I spent two months at Keanu's house on the weekends working on the script. When I first went and met with him and walked into his house, and as he rounded the corner to say hello to me—it's a nice house, it's not ostentatious for a guy who's worth, I dunno, billions—and I look in his office, I see he has three hundred screenplays stacked on his desk, because he reads *everything* that UTA, WME, William Morris sends out. He reads them all. And so to think that he read something on a Friday, in ninety minutes, and was like, "I want to do it." In that moment, before I met and really clicked with him, I was like, "Yeah, I really want to do it, too." The first thing that Keanu said to me was, "Okay, Derek, I'm going to play him thirty-five." And I'm like, "F-f-f-fine."

BASIL IWANYK

It was hard for us to find a director. To be honest with you, and with all due respect to the directors that we met with, no one was that exciting. Everyone was like, "This feels like a straight Keanu Reeves action movie." Which is weird, because it's not like Jason Statham—there *was* no Keanu Reeves genre movie.

JONATHAN SELA
(director of photography, *John Wick*)

What's great about Keanu is he's a movie fanatic. He watches all the movies and knows a lot about cinema, he knows filmmakers, he knows film language. And that makes all the difference. He's there all the time, whatever it takes. And it really makes a big difference. We were working on *Bullet Train*, and Hiroyuki Sanada, a very famous Japanese kung fu actor, never left the set: "We're all just making this movie. Whatever it takes, I'm here for you." We all have something to give. Everybody helps each other. Somehow actors have become isolated from the process, but not Keanu. He's there. He really understands what it takes to tell a story.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Dialogue is key, but in that first one, that back-and-forth scene between [John] and the priest, was at one point five pages long, and then it was

rendered down with Keanu going, “Uh-huh.” And I think, the ability to look at something like the Man with No Name movies is—you can watch Clint Eastwood say nothing for eleven minutes, but you’re in. You can feel there’s a hero’s journey taking place, and an evolution of the character. But there’s only so much I can do while writing that. You temper it, and you partner with guys like David Leitch and Chad Stahelski, and they totally understand what you’re doing. They want to layer in story and mythology and all that kind of stuff, but you also want a guy that walks in the room and everyone gives him the snake eye, but there’s one guy in the back who gives him the “fuck off,” and he just takes off. That’s more than enough to tell you, “Ah, that guy’s a badass.” Because as soon as that guy walks in and goes, “Hey, everyone, I’m a badass,” I don’t give a shit. But if you walk in all humble like, and somebody’s scared of him? Suddenly, he’s badass.

BASIL IWANYK

Keanu’s the king. I don’t care what anybody says. Well, everyone says nice things about him. But I’ll say this: a lot of times, actors or celebrities will throw a narrative out there about how nice or charitable they are or that sort of stuff, and it’s either complete horseshit or some level of horseshit. But as good a guy people think Keanu Reeves is, he’s even better. I’m going on my fourth movie with him. I’ve been there when things were down and when things were up—every single scenario you could possibly be, I’ve seen him in an element. And he’s just a really decent and good man. He’s generous, and he’s supportive, he’s empathetic. He’s just a star, in every way. As much as Chad and Dave did a fantastic job on that movie and Chad continues to do it, and our heads of the departments are amazing, these movies are so much the heart and soul of Keanu. So many of the creative elements on all of these films are part of him—not just on his own thing. If it wasn’t for his patience, we would never be sitting here talking about this. I owe everything to him. And the good news is it’s changed his life as well. What I love about him is he is tickled by all this. He thinks it’s so cool that at this time in his career he’s become this legendary action figure. And he’s happy. We’re all happy.

DEREK KOLSTAD

What I really like about Keanu is that he's a normal, laid-back guy. He's incredibly bright and such a hard worker. We spent as much time developing the other characters as we did his. He recognizes that the strength of the story line lies in even the smallest details. I spent two months at Keanu's house on the weekends working on the script. Chad Stahelski and Dave Leitch threw their hats in the ring to direct, but Keanu had known them for years, and Keanu loves new talent. He's a huge fan of helping others. Both across Hollywood and without, he's a good dude.

BASIL IWANYK

So we hired Chad Stahelski and Dave Leitch. We called them up to say, "We'd like you to be our second unit stunt guys," and they said, "Great." And then they said, "Also, can we come in and put our hat in to direct the film?" And we were like, "Sure!" They came in and blew us away with their take. I didn't know how I would present it to Keanu, because I didn't know if he would get offended and say, "I'm going to get these directors who have never directed anything? And Chad was my stunt double on *Matrix*?" But Keanu called and said, "I have an idea: What about Chad and Dave directing?" Great idea. So we had Chad and Dave.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

Chad is the most professional martial arts nerd I think I've ever met, but the best thing about it is that he is a martial artist at heart, and he's a very talented martial artist and a very knowledgeable martial artist. So directing action movies coming from a stunt background just breeds a genius level of action designs that he's creating and he's able to portray what his vision is, to where sometimes people might be like, "Oh, that doesn't make any sense." But we've all worked together for so long that we're kind of a well-oiled machine. He's able to translate that very well to just get these shots and these takes. Also, Keanu and he have their own history, so everything just works because Keanu trusts him. He's seen Chad grow throughout the years and his vision has towards these films as well.

KEANU REEVES

Chad and David were looking for a project to direct, and I always wanted to work with them. I like how they are and who they are. When *John Wick* came, I sent it to them first for action, but in the back of my mind, I thought it would be to their taste. I didn't know how that was going to go, but I kind of presented it.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

I got the script on a Friday, read it, and called Dave on that Saturday.

DAVID LEITCH
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *Deadpool 2, Bullet Train,* and *Atomic Blonde*)

Chad and I talked about it and were like, "Man, this is like three-quarters action anyway; maybe this is a good one to direct."

CHAD STAHELSKI

We got on the phone with Keanu and said, "Look, we'd like to direct your movie, or at least put our names in for the directing job on it," and he was ecstatic about that.

KEANU REEVES

They really responded to the material and then went and pitched their ideas, and Basil loved it. I loved it!

DEREK KOLSTAD

The two lines that Chad, Dave, and I came up with in the first one, and we reiterated in the second one time and time again, was, "The best movies are unique but familiar, and you want the action to be intimate but bigger." The way I reiterate that is, when we did the table read four days before the beginning of the first *John Wick*, the dog dies. Half the table is crying. And Chad goes, "Oh, for fuck's sake! You read the goddamn script!" But it worked. At the end of the table read, Basil said, "Man, this is a violent movie." And Keanu's like, "But it could be so much more."

ADRIANNE PALICKI

(actor, “Ms. Perkins,” *John Wick*)

You’re always nervous going into something when it’s a first-time director, but knowing that they came from this world and how amazing they are as second unit directors pushed me towards wanting to do this action movie with them.

WILLEM DAFOE
(actor, “Marcus,” *John Wick*)

This was a chance for them to do what they really wanted to do, so there was an enthusiasm there, a freshness and an eagerness and openness that is seductive to me. The way that they work together is very smooth. I’ve worked with codirectors before, not so many times, but I have done it before. Usually, it’s kind of like, “That’s the person who deals with the actors, and that’s the person that sets up the shot.” There’s usually a kind of clear personality or clear tendency, and in this case, it’s quite fluid. I don’t exactly know who’s responsible for what; I think they tried a certain kind of collaboration and a kind of understanding of what they’re working on and where it’s going to fit into the bigger picture. Even though they were new directors, they understand very well the mechanics of how to put together a movie.

KEANU REEVES

I really enjoyed the opportunity of working with Chad and Dave, with their experience and real enthusiasm of, “Let’s go and do this; there’s no challenge that can’t be faced, no challenge that can’t be overcome. We must get it. We must do it. What do we have to do? What can we do? This is what we do.”

CHAD STAHELSKI

The first one was a huge learning experience for us. It was a great way to pool what we did, and we made far more mistakes than we didn’t. But it was a great learning experience. We’re very proud of how things worked; we took a big bite for our first one, we stretched our budget and our schedule to the absolute limits, probably in detrimental ways sometimes, but in other ways, we fought for what we felt we really wanted and what we believed in, and I think we got that.

BASIL IWANYK

Their take for the movie and their visual presentation were so in line with what we were thinking the movie should be. Everything from the color palette to the way in which the action should be staged and shot just felt right.

CHAD STAHELSKI

It had gunfights, knife work, car chases, and lots of hand-to-hand combat. Dave and I talked about the potential to make a great graphic-novel-influenced action movie set in an almost mythical world. We pushed Keanu, Basil, and the guys at Thunder Road with the idea of *John Wick* as an urban legend, a thriller assassin movie with a realistic vibe and an otherworldly setting.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

John Wick is a dark comedy. In the army, I met a lot of ice-cold murderers—killers that were ice-cold funny, and you would never know it until the moment came. But when you tell someone that the blade is in your aorta, if you remove it, you will die—for me, this is John Wick. It's a comedy. He's a comedian in a strange, dark way. And Reeves is a gem of a human, but he's had a lot of trauma in his past, and I feel like that deep sense of sadness shines through in these characters that he plays, especially John Wick. I'm not talking about *Bill & Ted*, but when he's John Wick, there's a deep sense of sadness that he taps into and brings with him. I feel like he was really in touch with that.

CHAD STAHELSKI

When you read something that was on the page like *John Wick*, it reads like the typical graphic novel antihero—someone that's very hard-edged that has a supersoft side and superhard side and is all about revenge. But after having worked with Keanu for so long, he brings a more emotional side to most of the roles he does. He's never played something that's hard as nails, the absolute Terminator of killers. He's always got a more humanistic side to him. So we thought rather than try to do your stereotypical badass

assassin that goes on a rampage, we'd try to make it a bit more tender, or human as a better description. John is definitely a symbol of duality for sure. I wouldn't say it's good versus evil or anything like that. I would just say it's between what people have to endure and what people *want* to endure. John has many things that he does endure and a couple of things he doesn't want to endure. We all have those things, only John gets to live out those fantasies as a bit of wish fulfillment that most of us couldn't do.

KEANU REEVES

The dialogue is hard-boiled, but it's also got the humor of graphic novels, the kind of amazingly original imagery and framing that we've come to associate with them. It's a unique vision. I thought it was exciting and really cool to see all of these influences and experiences and craft come together. Chad always thinks about action in terms of narrative. He knows how to storyboard and pre-visualize the choreography; he has a lot of experience with the camera and with production issues. It's clear that this is what he and Dave *should* be doing right now.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The French did noir movies so well, even though I prefer the Japanese approach. They looked cooler and were better paced. The French noir, huge respect, but they're slow. One of my favorite movies of all time is still [director Carol Reed's] *The Third Man*, with Orson Welles. But that one was also a little bit of an outlier, because it's funny. But to me, noir is the ability to tell a story without dialogue.

CHAD STAHELSKI

I have to say, Keanu was very hands-on. He's one of the hardest-working men we've ever come across. He knows everyone's job. He can turn on a camera, he can shoot, he can edit, and he knows writing, character, directing, and, obviously, performing. He's always the first on set and the last to leave.

DAN LAUSTSEN
(director of photography, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

Keanu is amazing. He wants to do as much as he can. That's what I like about *John Wick.* Chad is superambitious, Keanu is super fun, and everybody just wants to do as good as we can. Chad never takes *no* for an answer; he wants to go all the way. Keanu is the same. It's fantastic to be together with people like that.

BASIL IWANYK

Keanu would shoot all night. There were times where he was sick, and we'd call cut, and he'd go over and vomit in a fucking wastebasket because he had a stomach flu. He was—and still is—indestructible. It's incredible what he does. He pushes himself to places that I'm in awe of.

JACKSON SPIDELL

Keanu probably did 90 percent of the fights throughout, from *Wick 1* to *Wick 3.* I would jump in if there were any hard falls, car hits, high falls, stuff like that. The really extreme stuff. And then the things that he actually still wanted to do, he's like, "Maybe I could, if I just get extra pads." We're like, "No, insurance literally won't let us do that with you."

J. J. PERRY

I've done 178 features and over 300 episodes of TV, and the only people I've seen that committed the way Keanu Reeves did were Joel Edgerton and Tom Hardy. And then there's a bunch of low-budget guys that'll go deep. But for the most part, I've worked on the *Fast & Furious* movies and *Gemini Man* and some massive action franchises, and they don't train nearly that hard. For the most part, movie stars want to show up and do what they do, and we figure it out, and the stunt double will do the hard work, the lion's share. For the most part, that's typically the way it goes. Keanu is an extraordinary person, not just in his commitment to the films but his generosity of spirit. He's just a righteous dude. All of us would take a bullet for him, because he goes all in.

JACKSON SPIDELL

What we tried to do is tighten the target level and make it very much more intimate with fighting and having your character be in these long takes in these fights. And also, it's Keanu doing it. There's no wires

involved. It’s all about timing, and it’s all about the training that went into it. And when he performs these fight sequences, they literally speak for themselves on how much he trained, how much we all trained together to make it such a good harmony, if that makes sense.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

I taught him the Filipino martial art called Kali. He flew me in for the apartment scene. Training him, I was thinking whoever is going to choreograph the movie or coordinate the movie, Keanu would be able to do anything they ask him. When you watch it, he’s doing superlong takes, and it’s just amazing. But what makes it great is there’s a mental part of the character that’s more than just physical, which I think people fail to realize. It’s like the physical manifestation of the characters sometimes is through the fighting or the way they do action. If you ever see Keanu shoot a gun on the range, he’s really good with the gun, right? It’s because he trains so much. You can see it on the screen. He has the little nuances that people only get if you really train. He trains *constantly.*

J. J. PERRY

You want to help Keanu, because he’s going to go for it and we’re all friends. So we all have something invested there, because Chad is our old friend and so is Keanu. There’s no way we’ll let them fail. Which means we’re probably waiving all of our overtime and working six and seven days and not billing. We do whatever we have to do to make it right for our team, because Keanu is part of our 87eleven family. Reeves is next-level commitment. He did it for *Wick 4,* and he’s fifty-six years old. I mean, I’m fifty-three, and I’m a busted-up old stuntman. It’s not easy. He’s an extraordinary guy.

MARK DACASCOS

A well-choreographed, intense-dynamic fighting sequence between two people you can equate to something like *Top Gun.* I think the way they choreograph with the planes, the plane becomes part of the personality and physicality of the character. To me, it’s the same thing when you’re fighting

with a weapon. That weapon becomes part of the body. When you just do hand-to-hand combat, you're taking away that extended piece, but you're also making it more visceral, because it's their flesh doing everything. I do believe that excellent director Chad Stahelski and Keanu brought the *Wick* movies up another level in terms of action movies. To me, it's a full movie, because you have interesting characters and you're not just waiting for the fight sequences. I like the characters in the movie.

DEREK KOLSTAD

I would argue, if you want to write this kind of genre, you do blow-by-blow, but then you segue into the sixties Batman, all of it—the two words that are my favorite are "thump-thump." That's just the sound of a silenced gun. Everyone knows what that word is. I love the line that John gives as good as he gets. Meaning that in the first one—in all of them—being able to sacrifice part of yourself to win the fight. *Those* are characters that we root for and want to be.

★ ★ ★

But despite what seemed like the perfect alchemy for creating a new action classic, nothing was remotely assured. With John Wick *hurtling toward the start of production, there was little in its pedigree that assured success other than the confidence of those involved. With filming nearing its start date, Thunder Road still hadn't secured a theatrical distributor for the film in the United States.*

BASIL IWANYK

We didn't have a domestic deal, because everybody passed—they thought the premise was potentially goofy. Chad and Dave were unknowns, and Keanu was a bit on his heels. And frankly, it was my first independent movie, so I didn't even have the track record of a good action producer. Now people give me the benefit of the doubt because of the action movies we've done, but at that point, they'd be like, "Okay, *The Town* and *Clash of the Titans*, but that was Warner Bros. This is just you." So we went into the process exposed.

★ ★ ★

Things quickly went from bad to worse, as what began as a risky bet for the producer began to quickly unravel before production even began.

BASIL IWANYK

The problem we had in the middle of selling the movie was *47 Ronin* came out and shit the bed. And [Reeves's directorial debut] *Man of Tai Chi*, which I thought was a good movie, came out and didn't perform like people thought it would perform. There was always this perception that Keanu is huge in Asia, and *Man of Tai Chi* was China set. But it didn't make any money in China, and *47 Ronin* didn't really do anything in Japan. So people were really worried about Keanu. They were like, "He's done." They wrote him off quickly. We had strong presales, but we also had important territories that didn't feel that there was still gas left in the tank.

★ ★ ★

Unfortunately for Iwanyk, with production imminent, the vagaries of independent producing became evident with unreliable investors, and without deep studio coffers to fall back on, the film was imperiled.

BASIL IWANYK

I didn't know what I was doing in the independent [film] financing world. Zero idea. Neither, unfortunately, did any of my executives. And ultimately, when the movie started shooting, we realized that. Not only did I defer my fees but I deferred them twice. We literally had to make my entire fee back and then pay out again before I saw a penny, which was a disaster. Our financier decided not to show up with the money. He did things that children do. Like, if he owed us $2.4 million, he'd send us a check for $2,400, and go, "Whoops! I messed up." It was stuff like that. It was a disaster to the point where we had to push the movie when it was only about five days out. There was a period of time where I was like, "Maybe I should just pull the plug. This is a disaster."

And I called my lawyer and said, "If I pull the plug right now, who would sue me?" And they're like, "SAG, DGA, CAA." I wrote it all down on a Post-it, taking notes, and then I'm like, "Okay, I'm not going to pull

the plug.” I still have that Post-it framed in my office in Los Angeles, next to the first-day call sheet. You’re totally exposed, because you don’t have a studio, it’s just you. And Keanu came into the office and was just like, “Do you think we’re going to make this movie?” I said, “One hundred percent. Don’t sweat it, we’ll get there.” “Okay, that’s all I need to know.” Never heard from him again. He was fine. Costume designer came in and said, “Do you think this movie’s going to go?” And I said, “Yeah.” “Can I borrow your credit card? I still need to buy some wardrobe.” I said, “Here you go,” telling myself I’ll get air miles. And then, ultimately, the money came in. It wasn’t 100 percent of the money that came in, but Chad and David made some cuts, and then we made the movie.

★ ★ ★

Ultimately, with the budget secured and concessions made from some of its principals, John Wick *would go on to make its creative team rich (or richer, in some cases), and its dramatic success would spawn multiple sequels and a Starz TV miniseries with* John Wick *creator Derek Kolstad having the last laugh, no longer scorned by Hollywood.*

DEREK KOLSTAD

Honestly, one of my favorite things is, with all the work I do now, you get a driver at the airport, they drive everyone, and they’re always like, “What do you do?” “Oh, I’m a screenwriter.” “What do you fucking write?” “Oh, not a lot.” I’d say, “I wrote *John Wick*.” I’ve had two drivers now pull over, put it in park, and look in the back and go, “That’s my favorite fucking movie.” When you think about it, it took me fifteen years to become a screenwriter and it actually pays the bills, and if that’s an overnight success, I’ll take it.

3 GUN CRAZY

“Well, John wasn’t exactly ‘the boogeyman.’ He was the one you sent to kill the fuckin’ boogeyman.”

While the script, directors, and star had been locked into place, with financing secured, the filmmakers shifted focus to filling out other key members of the cast and crew, among them director of photography Jonathan Sela, veteran of such films as 20th Century Fox’s remake of The Omen *(2006) and later* Deadpool 2 *(2018) and* Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw *(2019) as they careened to the beginning of principal photography.*

JONATHAN SELA
(director of photography, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

John Wick is like falling in love. You were in the right place at the right time, and the universe put all the stars together. I met David Leitch almost ten years before on a horror movie that Clive Barker wrote called *The Midnight Meat Train.* It was a Japanese-directed, very visual movie and one of Bradley Cooper’s first movie roles; he hadn’t done much. David came aboard as the stunt coordinator for really interesting fight sequences. The director wanted an Asian flavor, but wanted to do it all with the actors. When David showed up, we totally connected. He was just a little different, more filmmaker than stunt coordinator. Most stuntmen come in and go, “This is my sequence, this is what I’m thinking,” but he came saying, “This is your guys’ movie, I’m just here to help.” So we got along really well. There was no ego, just two filmmakers along with the director. Dave and I really took charge of that sequence, because we knew what we were doing.

We stayed in touch, and when he got the opportunity to do the first *John Wick*, he brought me in with him and Chad. I read the script and saw that there was a lot of action, and I'm not really an action guy. For me, it's story and a character-driven approach. I had seen *A History of Violence* a year before and always loved the fact that you knew there was a big story there, but you didn't know how deep it was. It's the same thing with *John Wick*; you watch it and you still don't know *how* he became that person. He survives all these moments, but it's not like you go back to when he was twenty and see his training. You don't get that part of the movie, yet you go with the mystery. I love that. It's this man, his story, and what he's going through. For me, that was what made the project so interesting.

★ ★ ★

One of the most fascinating aspects of the John Wick *universe are the interactions between various diverse characters such as those between John Wick and the manager of the Continental, Winston (Ian McShane, of* Deadwood *and* American Gods*). Among the other members of an eclectic ensemble that was assembled for the film were* The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*'s Michael Nyqvist as Viggo Tarasov,* Game of Thrones*' Alfie Allen as Viggo's son Iosef,* The Orville*'s Adrianne Palicki as the villain within the Continental, Ms. Perkins, and* 30 Rock*'s Dean Winters as Avi, representing Viggo's middle management. In a bit of a casting coup, the filmmakers also cast Willem Dafoe as Wick's fellow assassin Marcus and* The Wire*'s Lance Reddick in the role of Charon, the Continental's erstwhile concierge. And in a small but pivotal role,* Blue Bloods*' Bridget Moynahan played Helen Wick. But perhaps the most important and memorable casting of all was the hiring of the eight-week-old Andy … as John's dog.*

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

Unless you're an auteur—a Christopher Nolan, Scorsese, or Spielberg—who can get who you want, when you look at the first *John Wick*, it's like, "Who's available in two and a half weeks? And who can we afford?" So we didn't have the luxury of writing for *anybody.* And yet what I love about Ian McShane is that he is the classic Hitchcock bad guy, where he

talks too much. And you might argue that he isn't saying anything, but the reality is, he's saying *everything.* Now that's not blowing smoke up my own narrative ass. He's talking in circles; that's what he does. And with Charon, you want a guy who is the blue collar within the white-collar world. And yet he's the kind of guy who, if the head of the High Table walked in, Charon would be the only guy who would intimidate *him.* That's where a lot of the playfulness comes into play. There are any number of on-screen bromances or partnerships—like Robert Redford and Paul Newman in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*—where there was a warmth there. You're like, "I think these guys actually do like each other." Then there are classic examples that worked, but they hated each other. You just don't know.

I love having the board of actors up on the wall, all the headshots. At the time for Winston, we had all these people that were available and that we could afford. And there were a couple on there where I was like, "Holy shit. That's awesome." I'd be like, "Honestly? This guy'd be great." Then there'd be somebody saying, "Yeah, no." So you begin to learn.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

The script had a great tone. That kind of weird loopy tone, like when he fights someone who begins, "Hello, John." That script always had that formality. That formality is something that Keanu really responded to, because he's inherently a formal guy. And that was kind of evoked from knights and chivalry.

JONATHAN SELA

At the beginning of *John Wick,* there was a lot of soft light, but there was also some hard. It's not always a hard light, but there's a lot of in and out that sometimes are between color, and sometimes between shadow and a hard source. Even when he goes to the club, he's in shadow, and he steps into the light. There's a lot of those things to keep the mystery. There's always so much mystery between characters, you don't know who to trust. Even when he goes with Willem Dafoe and opens the window and there's the shafts of light. Again, you wanted to give them options and choices to who lights who. Who's in the light and who's in the dark. Always. So I just

went with it. Every scene—and with every character—I tried to tell a story with light.

★ ★ ★

After one false start pushed production by two weeks, John Wick *finally rolled cameras on October 7, 2013, for a nine-week shoot in and around New York City. Every film involves extensive and exhaustive planning, but this one in particular would require a Herculean effort coordinating the biggest details to the smallest if the team was going to be able to pull it off on a compressed and budgetarily compromised schedule.*

BASIL IWANYK

We shot in New York for probably forty-one days, and we were trying to pour eight gallons of water into a four-gallon pail, because you're pushing to the limits and trying to be as extreme as you can. There were a lot of tough night shoots in New York, and it was cold as hell, but all in all, the actors were great. They were fun, they were cool, and they were in good spirits. Chad and Dave worked their asses off. They put everything on the line, and it was fun to be in New York. I don't want to say it was uneventful, because there was a lot of stress and anxiety, but we ended with a lot of money left in the contingency. We pushed hard. But it was a good shoot. There was none of those crazy kind of production stories at all. None of those, "What are we doing?" Chad and Dave are pros. They've been on more sets than I'll ever be. They know how to, at least back then, be on their days and get their budgets. I don't know if I could say that now, but back then, it was like, "Oh, shoot, we've got to move!"

DEREK KOLSTAD

I've always loved New York, but all of my research, honestly, is based on movies and stuff I love. Going back to the Scotts [Ridley and Tony] and Michael Mann and all that kind of stuff. I love those scenes in movies, especially in noir, where the city—Chicago, LA, Philly—is a character. I'm out in Pasadena, which is just outside the bubble of LA, but I love big cities, because you can go anywhere and choose to stand out or disappear. Doesn't matter who you are. And I love that in New York. I also love the

look and feel of the streets, and the lights and the darks and the shadows. It's a tough city to shoot in, but what city isn't?

And yet, you just want John Wick there, man. He felt like he was both a part of it and far removed from it.

BASIL IWANYK

The process of the movie was actually pretty fun. Shooting in New York City with a great group of guys was fun. But I will say that the week and a half leading up to the shooting of the movie was—no question—the hardest week and a half of my career. So much so, my wife and my kids came out to see me in New York, because they were really worried about me. I couldn't eat, and I couldn't sleep. If it went down, it just would've been over for me. I had a lot on the line. At the same time, it was some of the greatest memories of my career—right before the first *John Wick*, I was having stunt meetings where we just had a bunch of Matchbox cars and were going, "Oh, what if the car went this way and we went that way." And I'm like, "Holy shit, I used to play army men and Matchbox cars when I was ten. Now here I'm in my forties and we're still doing it. That is *so* cool!"

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

I grew up doing martial arts. Chad and Dave and I went to a martial arts school where I was one of their students. Then they got the stuntman gig, and I followed them into stunt work. Years later, 87eleven formally came into being after the movie *300*, and during this time, Chad and Dave wanted to make the move into directing and were trying to find the right vehicle to start. Which they did with *John Wick.* And the good thing was that during that time, we were always training and kind of making pre-viz. You can actually see our older stuff and the progressions to, say, the *John Wick* style. So it just took the right amount of pieces to make it work. The funny part is, when we were making the style originally, we were designing them for different actors. Every actor kind of does it differently, and when we taught it to Keanu, he made it look a certain way. The weird thing is, when I was growing up, Keanu was the best, and he looked the best with

the gun. When you see Keanu do it, there's something smooth and elegant about the way he does it, so that style fits him the best. It's magic. You can see it.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Keanu and Bob Odenkirk, who starred in *Nobody,* are among the few actors who, when you work with them on a screenplay, they're more in tune with everything that they're *not* saying and doing than what they are. So they don't want *more* dialogue, they want less. They want more character and for it to be truly unspoken. When I go through notes with Keanu, it's equal across the board: he has an opinion on every page. And he's been doing it so long and so right that you're kind of like, "That's better. Fuck, that's better."

DAVID LEITCH
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *Deadpool 2, Bullet Train,* and *Atomic Blonde*)

"How do I make this work for the character? What am I learning about the character in this moment?" They're now going to use the action to define them in a more compelling way for the audience. Directing action is just in my blood, and I'll always bring it to whatever project I'm on in some capacity. Even if the action is simple. When I read a script, I'm always thinking about how I can make the set pieces work more efficiently, or work better for the story, or adding spectacle for the purposes of making the character stronger, or putting them in more peril, or defining them better.

JONATHAN SELA

Every scene we went and broke together, we'd say, "Who is this guy? Why is he doing what he's doing? What's the point of every scene? How do we start, how do we finish?" It's not just coverage—we wouldn't just throw cameras in it, so that really informed the understanding of what this movie was. We formed a visual tone, a visual style. Then I started putting colors on it or lenses on it. Camera moves, colors. I built this palette of "On the Ground New York" and "Aboveground New York," which characters are connected and which are not. Using colors to connect characters and not connecting characters. When are we moving, when are we not moving?

Through that, we created this design of the movie that didn't necessarily have a "Oh, this is what this movie is going to be," but by diving in and analyzing the story, we formed a visual language of the story and what this movie is.

★ ★ ★

A key element to that visual language would come through the editor. Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir's previous action film credit was for Mark Wahlberg's 2012 production of Contraband, *but otherwise, she had largely been known for small indie dramas out of Europe and her native Iceland.* John Wick *would change that perception forever.*

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR
(editor, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

It's actually a funny story, because I had been working with a director, Baltasar Kormákur, who is also from Iceland, but who has also been doing good things in Hollywood. He was up to do a movie called *2 Guns*, and I thought I would edit it, but as it turns out, he thought somebody else would be a better fit. So I was kind of in the air when my agent sends me a text and says, "There's these two stunt guys you should meet with." I remember driving to a meeting thinking, *This is where I am going to end. Doing a movie with two stunt guys. I should go back home.* I met Chad, because David was somewhere else during the first meeting, and fell in love with his passion for the genre. Those guys are not only beautiful, they are extremely intelligent. And they know the genre so well, they know the history so well, it's just a pleasure talking to them. You don't have the possibility to *not* get fired up, so I was super excited.

But I didn't get the job until a month later, because I hadn't met David. I was supposed to Skype with him and Chad, but I had to go to this film festival that brought together filmmakers and musicians. So I went and kept waiting for this Skype, but they kept postponing it, because things kept coming up. I was like, "I'm never going to get that movie." In the meantime, I'd just read the script when I went to a concert and heard these two girls playing in a castle in Poland, and I connected straightaway with this song "Think." A week later, I jumped on Skype with David; we got

along so well, and I was hired. Then, when I was editing the movie, I contacted the girls, who had never published anything, asked them if they could send me that track, and they did. So that's how that track showed up in the movie. It's so funny how things just come together in the universe.

★ ★ ★

While John Wick *was directed by the duo of David Leitch and Chad Stahelski, with both having come from a stunt background, and while they could speak the same language, they differed greatly in terms of directorial style.*

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

They're very different people, they're like black and white. But they're both so lovable. Chad is maybe a bit more hyper. Gets more excited. David's a bit more down to earth. Both have positive and negative sides to them, but I have to say, I've only ever seen their positive sides. I adore them both.

DEREK KOLSTAD

This is what I love about Chad: we both reference our favorite movies even if they're bad. One of the things that Chad will bring up all the time is, "Remember those scenes in *Return of the Pink Panther* where all the assassins are after Clouseau? What if we did that straight?" That was always in the back of our heads. Common's character in *John Wick: Chapter 2*, we always liked the idea of what if he's just another side of John? John lets him live or die, we don't know yet, but his character makes sense. You want to make sure your bad guy thinks they're the good guy. Having that in play at any time makes it more fun and makes the actor want to play them.

JONATHAN SELA

They weren't inexperienced. What was interesting was, as friends or even as partners, everyone thinks they know each other and then you go there and you're like, "Oh, let's do this," and they're like, "I don't want to do that." So there was a lot of different opinions. A big part of the job was

figuring out how to bring those two people together. Sometimes I liked Dave's ideas, sometimes I liked Chad's ideas, sometimes I didn't like either of the ideas. It's like, how do you help them come together or push it without offending one or the other while navigating to where you think the movie really needs to be? There was a lot of that. But in a good way. Even in that, you have to make the best choice. So that was a really fun, healthy part of making a movie. It's not always easy, but this sort of collaboration just doesn't exist so much in movies today. We're so formulated to American cinema—how to do coverage, where does the camera go?—that very few actual decisions are made. Very few bold choices.

What was cool about Dave and Chad, even though they hadn't really directed, is that they had a really good history of filmmaking. Chad is an amazing director to work with. We can talk about anything. We can analyze the script, we can really break it down. I remember when we met, for them, it was really a big deal. "It's our first movie!" Even though they've been on sets and been second unit directors, it's always servicing someone else. It's never been, "Well, this is *your* choice. *You're* responsible for it." So there was a great partnership. And it was a time in my career where I just wanted to talk about story. I just wanted to talk about choices. Not just, "Well, let's show up in front of the camera." I don't want to do that anymore, I don't want to be here with the idea of, "Just make it look great." It's not about great-looking. I wanted to have partnerships with people who wanted to dive in and really be fully responsible for the creation we make. We might fail. We might succeed. It's not about that.

EVAN SCHIFF
(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

The biggest difference I've noticed between Chad and Dave are personality differences. Obviously, they're both very talented stunt guys, they're both very talented, story-focused directors. You can have a conversation with both of them, getting into the nitty-gritty of what references they're making, what movies are important to them, what they're trying to achieve with the sequence. You can talk to them about editing. Some directors don't particularly converse in editorial speak very well, but the number of times I would start talking to Dave and say, "Oh, you should be careful about this thing over here, because then, you know, ten scenes

over here," and he'd be like, "Yeah, yeah, then ten scenes over *here*…" You can't always have that shorthand with a director when you're trying to explain to them something that might come to bite them down the road, but is very abstract in that sense because they haven't shot it yet. So they're both great at that. You can see where they came up together, and then you can see where their own personalities diverge.

Chad is much more of the dictator on set, I would say. Dave is a little more … friendly. There's "on-set Chad," and then there's "editorial Chad." Editorial Chad loves to talk all day long—he'll come in and we'll talk for an hour about whatever movie he watched last night. He's very friendly, very loyal, laid-back, he does his jujitsu—he teaches jujitsu in the morning for two hours and then comes in and cuts for the rest of the day. He's chill.

But on set, he is an entirely different guy. On set, you can look at him from one hundred feet away and say, "I should probably not go near him right now." On *Wick 3,* we were on the roof of the Bowery King set, and they were setting up the next shot, and Chad was just in a folding chair literally in the middle of the set, all this action was going on around him. It was unclear to me exactly what was happening besides the general setting up of the shot. And I was like, "What's happening? What are you doing?" And he says, "Well, if I leave the set, then everybody relaxes. And I don't want them to relax. I want them to work." *That's* Chad. I didn't get a chance to go on the *Bullet Train* set [David Leitch's 2021 Sony action film starring Brad Pitt] more than once because of COVID restrictions, but I could just hear in the dailies, there's more laughing on set. Dave's a little more jovial on set than Chad is.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

I've always been interested in action. I'm not a nerd, I wouldn't be able to name a hundred action movies, but I've seen them. I love choreography. I have a dance background, and for me, this is the alpha male dance, and I think it's glorious. Plus, they always choose tall people to do their action. And it gives completely different aesthetics. It's beautiful. Just the hand movements get a bit longer, the kicks get a bit longer. I'm not saying short people aren't beautiful as well, but it kind of defines what they're doing. Even in *Deadpool 2,* Ryan Reynolds is pretty tall.

EVAN SCHIFF

One of the things we talked about in the interview is that Chad doesn't like mid-motion cuts; he doesn't like cutting in the middle of a punch. He told me very early on, "The only time we're going to cut to close coverage is if there's a mistake we have to cover up." I'm glad we had those conversations early on, because that set the parameters for me as an editor. My job is to try and figure out what he wants and to give it to him, so him laying it out so clearly early on was great.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

The first thing Chad asked me was, "What do you *not* like about action?" And I told him, "It's when everything is close up and I can't see shit." And I always think *that's* the thing that got me hired. But again, I don't make action. I only work with what they give me. Jonathan Eusebio is an amazing stunt coordinator, and those guys—they *know* where to put the camera. And David and Chad *know* where to put the camera. They train their actors. Both Keanu Reeves for *John Wick* and Charlize Theron for *Atomic Blonde,* they train for months to be able to get those long takes. My dance background kept me away from butchering what they did. This is stunt photography, which is an absolute art form. I'm still so pissed that they didn't get an Oscar.

EVAN SCHIFF

The footage he shoots is what I would call "very readable." I can watch it in isolation, in my office, without talking to Chad, and know exactly where I need to be in a fight sequence in terms of an angle I'm showing to an audience. So between shooting with intention, with footage that is easily readable, and having that conversation, it was relatively easy actually for me to come in and cut these scenes in the style that he was looking for. That style was born out of Chad shooting second unit and directing second unit and coming up with all these incredible fights and then seeing them be destroyed when the movie finally came out. I think he was frustrated that he was not getting the chance to see through the scenes that he had conceived.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

It was so equal. Chad and David were always together on set, discussing everything, and in the editing room, we were discussing everything. They are *not* directors who sit and say, “Two frames, three frames,” which I actually found very respectful. They wouldn’t do that. All we were discussing were characters. Because I come from Iceland, I like to approach it as a Viking saga, because there you can slap someone and five hundred people die. That’s just a normal, extremely violent day. So we were just talking about that, how the story would go and what would happen. I remember that there was one scene that, oh my God, we spent days on saying, “Should it be here? Should it be here? Maybe if we move it behind here?” We took this one scene and moved it back and forth, and there were discussions and meetings, and we kept moving it backwards and forwards, and then it ended up where it is. It’s the scene where he goes driving with the dog. He’s spinning on the empty airfield. And that’s where the big discussion was about the dog—not necessarily about whether the dog should be killed but that should he have the dog in the car? Is *he* going to kill the dog?

BASIL IWANYK

When you set up shots with the dog, the stand-in is a stuffed dog. And I’d be walking through, thinking, *Oh my God, this movie’s going to take me down professionally and financially,* and I’d look over and see ten people trying to light a stuffed dog, and I’m like, “I’m fucked.” It was insane.

DEREK KOLSTAD

There have been other movies where a cowboy’s horse is killed or, you know, a dog is killed, like *Red.* I didn’t think that’s what it would be all about. I thought it was going to be like, “Hey, holy crap, and holy crap, and holy crap,” and you peel back the layers of the world.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

There was no way people were going to see that dog getting killed on camera. That was never going to happen. But David especially really pressed for it to be the dog. The thing is, if John Wick’s going to kill a hundred people, there better be a good reason. And it’s kind of square that they killed his wife—that’s been done before. So the dog was a good thing.

It’s like a baby. You can’t have a baby killed. I like that it was a dog. I remember at some point going, “Maybe we shouldn’t have him say that for the hundredth time that they killed his dog,” but it was, “No, yes, they have to say it.” And it’s actually glorious that everyone says it: “They killed his dog…”

BASIL IWANYK

The big question we had over and over again in the script, which we really couldn’t answer until we showed the movie to an audience for the first time, is, “Is it worth all these people dying just because of his dog and his car? Are audiences going to go, ‘Okay, what are you doing?’” And are critics going to say, “This is so immoral. This is so nihilistic. And this is bullshit.” That was the big worry going in emotionally.

DEREK KOLSTAD

We always talked about John as almost the past, present, and future. One of the iterations we talked about was, “Do we show the night of the Impossible Task? Do we show the old John?” In reality, you had the John before, the John with Helen, and the John post-Helen. And from here on out, it’s the John post-Helen. And we’re like, “There’s no way he would go back in that capacity, because it would be an affront to her.” To me, that’s the ultimate Western. The best action movies find their roots in Westerns. Of going, “Just fucking shoot me, because if you walk away, I’m going to shoot you in the back.”

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

One of my favorite scenes in the movie is the one in which Wick smashes his basement floor with the sledgehammer and literally digs up his past. Enhanced by his screams of rage, it’s the moment when the ordinary guy we’ve been following up to now becomes a mythic character.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The idea in the screenplay, and again none of this is new, but the idea that he’s far removed from the life—he’s left it—and yet he’d go to the back porch and he could see the city in the distance. So he left it, but he’s

still in its shadow, and they beckon each other. *That's* why we love these movies. You look at Nicholson in *Chinatown*—he ain't leaving that city. That city is in him and he's in it. And I love that kind of stuff. Westerns are the same way. When the guy walks into town and then rides off into the sunset, he's gonna do the same fucking thing in the next town over. That's cool. And I just wanted to make sure we have that sense of playfulness amidst the bleak, but at the same time going, "Guys, wink, wink, movie." That's fun.

BASIL IWANYK

The biggest difference between the movie and the script was we had no idea we were building this world in the script. We had no idea that the world of John and the Continental would be as evocative as it was. We really had no clue. We knew that we were creating an alternate reality, but we had no idea that people would respond to that as much as they did. That was shocking. That was a testament to the production design, to the costume design, the casting—everything. But we looked at the movie and went, "Wow, we created a world here. With its own ecosystem. And it works!" And that was something I was not prepared for as a producer. We did not have those conversations during the script stage. We had it during the production and during the design, but never during the script stage. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe we would have erred on the side of world-building and lost sight of the other shit that's going on.

★ ★ ★

The iconic exterior of the Continental has been shot at the Beaver Building on Wall Street Court and Pearl Street. It once housed the New York Cocoa Exchange. The interiors for the hotel, however, have been shot at a variety of locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

JONATHAN SELA

The lobby [of the Continental] was a really cool old bank in the Financial District. We came in and brought some of the marble into it and glued it down to make it look high-end. But it's all about shafts of light, so it feels like the light is coming in from outside from the windows. Right

away, you feel like you're underground, which is really high-end-looking, but it's not. We were creating a kind of mystery. It's all about light and shadow—you're going in and out of light. Who's in the shadow, who's in the light? It's all these characters. I think a lot of those things came naturally. A lot of thoughts behind it, but it was also the only things that made sense. Felt like the right look, the right tone.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

We were at a place that was basically an old bank vault. It just felt expansive. When you watch the scene, it looks like we're going in all these rooms, but the whole lobby area was partitioned off and looks busier than it was.

RAY MORTON

As serious as the movie is, it does contain some very sly, very dry humor. The Jimmy the cop scene is laugh-out-loud funny. As is the bit in which Wick lets the doorman at the Red Circle go just before he begins his infiltration, as well as his interaction with Harry in the Continental's hallway later in the movie. The entire notion of the Continental and the accompanying notion that there's an entire parallel society of high-end criminals and hit men that live in and among the regular folks of New York City, and no one notices, is also extremely amusing.

JONATHAN SELA

The visuals always felt right. The choices always felt like the right choices. Things just fell together really organically and felt right to me. Everything had an idea or concept, but as you were doing it, working it out into what I thought it should be, everything just felt right. The challenge was time. In the sense of, when you're prepared, you can achieve what you want to achieve. When you don't have the time and there are scenes where you couldn't sit and talk, "What is this really about?" Obviously, we can't sit there on set for two hours and go, "What is this shot? Do we start with a close-up? A two-shot?" Sometimes those aren't even that in depth of a conversation, but it takes a decision when we're on set and have to go, "Oh yeah, we'll be back in two hours because we want to go decide what kind of coverage we need and think about it." You can see the difference in those

scenes, where you had to figure it out on the day. The ones where you put a lot of thought into it, they come together and feel so much stronger and powerful because you've given the audience every decision you've made. And most of the time, they were right. Because you've thought about the scene, read the dialogue, and thought, *When would I cut to a close-up? When is the wide shot?*, instead of just pointing cameras and shooting stuff.

RAY MORTON

I love the production design. The film takes place in New York City, but the design team chose primarily classical structures for the movie's locations and then lit and photographed in a highly gothic manner that creates a world for the story that isn't quite American but isn't quite European either. Instead, the film feels as if it is taking place in its own unique neverland.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

It's easy to keep in the wide shots when it's so well rehearsed. Amazing blocking. They know what they're doing. So for me, it's just fun. Our biggest arguments in *John Wick* were probably between me and Chad, and I love the guy, but I don't like repetitions, so I would cut down some of the fights. Repetitions can be useful, but they can also just be repetitions, and they can take away from the big experience of something that happens once. It can minimize it if it happens over and over and over, so that was probably our biggest fight. But we just had amazing fun. Sometimes it got really heated, but just in discussing things. And again, this was just so lovely, everyone was just so passionate about that movie. The studio kind of left us alone, which often happens with first movies, because they don't know what's going to happen, so they're not paying much attention.

BASIL IWANYK

Oh my God, that car chase on the docks, how bad is that? It's soooo bad. I think we were supposed to have three cars, and only two showed up. When we were shooting that ending in the first movie, I'm like, "This is not the way to end the movie." And we're like, "Hold on. Keanu Reeves is going to fight Michael Nyqvist? This guy's like sixty-seven years old.

How's this going to work?" That's when I'm like, "Hmmm … I wonder if this ending is going to play like a flat noodle."

RAY MORTON

The script takes an interesting approach to its antagonist. Structurally, Iosef should be the story's main villain because he's the guy who kills Wick's dog and steals his car and so sets Wick's rampage in motion. According to the traditional rules of dramatic structure, this means Iosef should be the last bad guy standing and the person Wick faces off against at the climax of the story. However, the *Wick* script does something clever by gradually pushing Iosef into the background and bringing his father, Viggo —Wick's former boss—to the fore. Viggo becomes the film's main villain, and Iosef becomes its MacGuffin, the thing everyone is pursuing, but ultimately doesn't matter so much in the overall scheme of things. Iosef ultimately becomes so insignificant that Wick finally just matter-of-factly shoots him and moves on without breaking a sweat, which I find incredibly amusing.

BASIL IWANYK

The John Wick now, in *John Wick 4,* would've taken out Michael Nyqvist in two moves. Held the knife, pushed it in, there it is.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

Movie martial arts and real martial arts are a little different. Movie martial arts is where you have the physicality of the martial arts. We have to understand camera and editing and all these things, because there are all these elements that have to be put together before it gets on camera. We have to choreograph it. Choreograph with the camera to make sure all your actors can get the movements down. There are all these elements before you even see it.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

J. J. [Perry], Chad, and Dave growing up in stunts and then moving to directing had a vision of how they wanted their action to look. And with that, whenever we had a project, we would ask to train our actors as much

as possible. Sometimes actors are like, “Well, I’ll come in for a little bit, but my double’s going to do it.” Actually, with us, that’s very few and far between now because we’ve gained the reputation of going, “Listen, you’re going to have to train a little bit, because we have a vision, and you’re going to be doing a lot of this. So hopefully, you’re down with that.” And they’ll say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” Like Charlize Theron for *Atomic Blonde*. So to have all those actors come in and train as much as they do was definitely our staple when we did a project.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

Making *John Wick* was never boring, and it worked well. We just had fun. It was one of those movies I wish I could do every year. It was so many people with big hearts coming together, putting everything into this movie. It’s what moviemaking is *supposed* to be about.

4 ANATOMY OF A FIGHT SCENE: THE RED CIRCLE

"Why don't you take the night off?"

A key element to the first film's success came from the adrenaline thrill ride of John Wick's assault on the Red Circle nightclub consisting of sixty armed thugs, numerous civilians, and just one Wick. In a combination of brilliant, candy-coated, neo-noir-infused, mise-en-scène, kinetic, imaginative fight scenes, Tyler Bates's pulsating score, and balletic gunfights, it's one of the most memorable action scenes ever committed to celluloid. Taking place in a nightclub, even the Red Circle embraces Wick's hyperreal aesthetic in the sense that there's an elaborate, sybaritic spa on the lower levels of the club in which barely bikini-clad waitresses wait on the hoi polloi of New York in large Jacuzzi tubs with drinks and what is presumably a gaggle of hookers.

The exterior of The Red Circle was filmed downtown in front of Surrogate's Court on Chambers Street near the Manhattan Municipal Building, City Hall, and Wall Street, transformed into a trendy nightclub with some strategically placed lighting, scaffolding, and limousines. The memorable interior for the shootout was filmed at the Edison Ballroom at 240 West 47th Street in Midtown Manhattan and the faux Roman tubs for the spa below was shot at Aire Ancient Baths on 88 Franklin Street.

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

I came out here when I was twenty-six to try and do "this," and I paid the bills through various means. Then I wrote this thing called *Acolyte*, which was a cool little screenplay—I'm really happy with it, and maybe

someday something will happen with it—and they were asking me what I wanted to do next. We had watched a couple of movies, and I realized I love revenge thrillers. I always write with old actors in mind—they're all usually long dead. In my mind, John Wick was Paul Newman. And in that script, the dog was sixteen years old. Same kind of iteration of the wife dying and the puppy and all that kind of stuff. The format, the structure, is all pretty much the same to what you see on-screen. I'd say the body count was half as much, a third as much. What's so funny is Chad, Dave, and Keanu were at a certain point going, "More, more, more." And we were like, "Fuck yeah, dude."

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

For us, it's like a sport. You train and you train and you train. You prepare for the stunt as best you can so that by the time you do it, you get all the kinks out. At *that* point, we execute it. The scariest part is the experimentation. The testing phase is sometimes more dangerous than the actual stunt. Anytime you do something like that, you always get nervous. It's like I used to do kickboxing and corner for people, and I used to get more nervous watching the guy fight, because I saw everything. The same thing when I see these guys about to do something, as their supervisor, I always get a little nervous for them. At the same time, fear or that kind of nervousness is the stuff that keeps us sharp. You have to have a little bit of it.

DEREK KOLSTAD

When it comes to the action, everyone writes differently. I like the operatic, the ballet of the action. The coolest thing in the world is to see the Red Circle scene in *John Wick.* On the one hand, I had written it in the script that he shoots that guy in the foot, and he leans forward and shoots him in the face. But I did not write where John grabs the guy's head and slams it down on the glass and unloads half a clip into his head. So when I saw it, I was like, "Holy shit!" Just chuckling all the way. The thing about action movies is that you have to convince the audience you are much deeper than you are. *Bond* movies are very simple, and yet there's enough

going on, enough that's interesting, and the pacing is on par, and you have the humor, levity, and soul, and you're in. So when you go to look at a rewrite to *John Wick*, it just goes to making sure that the pacing is on par and key.

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

The filmmakers of *John Wick* combined both the more physical, grounded action movies and the heightened, larger-than-life eighties and nineties approaches in an interesting way. The core elements of *John Wick* are absolutely absurd. Wick is another one-man army who no matter how much abuse he takes, never dies and can't be stopped; the film's body count is ludicrously high, the villains are outrageously decadent, and the entire notion of the Continental—the full-service, tightly regulated luxury hotel for assassins—is beyond ridiculous. It's all as over-the-top as anything from the eighties and nineties. However, the film treats all of this nonsense with absolute conviction and with dead seriousness. To them, all of this is absolutely real—as real as anything seen in the gritty action films of the sixties and seventies. And because *they* believe this, so do we. What would have been dismissed as direct-to-video claptrap in lesser hands becomes captivating in theirs. And this approach has proven to be very influential, as witnessed by some of the film's most significant follow-ups, such as *Atomic Blonde* and *Red Sparrow.* The narrative content of these films is the stuff of airplane novels and the cheesiest pulp fiction, but both are treated with the same seriousness as a great Russian novel, and as a result, both are extremely effective.

The second of *John Wick*'s innovations was its emphasis on highly choreographed, hand-to-hand combat. There have obviously been fistfights and knife fights and gunfights in movies before, but not with the intense precision, complexity, and balletic qualities of the fights in *John Wick.* The choreography between the performers and between the performers and the camera, and the editing, are as intricate, complex, and geometric as a Busby Berkeley musical number. The filmmakers took this classic form of choreography and combined it with the aesthetics and perspectives of a first-person shooter video game to create a unique style of cinematic action that really refreshed and enlivened the genre.

The third significant innovation *John Wick* brought to the action genre was its extraordinary brutality. The sixties and seventies action films were gritty and realistic, but the violence usually wasn't overly explicit (interestingly, there were some dramatic films of the era—such as *Taxi Driver* and *The Godfather*—that were much more explicit than the action pics). The violence and the body counts increased in the eighties and nineties, but most of the violence in these pictures was relatively cartoonish and over-the-top, which took the edge off of the intensity.

In contrast, the violence in *John Wick* is extremely explicit, evidenced nowhere more than in the dozens and dozens of head shots Wick delivers to his opponents; shots in which heads are blown open and blood, brains, and gore spray out in veritable geysers from blasted craniums. The level of gore is much worse than the most bloody horror movie to the point where at times the movie almost resembles a snuff film. It doesn't help that there is so much killing in the movie—Wick kills so many people in the movie that you literally lose count. The only other time I've seen this much brutal killing in a movie was in *Rambo*, a film that I'm sure would have been rated X for its onscreen carnage if the X rating was still a thing in 2008. The level of violence in *John Wick* is so brutal and so extreme that I will confess that when I first watched the film, I was really put off by how nasty it was. I am not at all a squeamish person, but I do have an aversion to cruelty, especially cruelty as entertainment. I can tolerate cruelty in a "serious" movie if it serves the narrative, but *John Wick* is not a "serious" film—it's an entertainment, and I don't find cruelty entertaining, I find it sadistic. And the first time I saw *John Wick*, I thought it was sadistic. After a while, I became numb to all the graphic killing, which made it hard for me to appreciate the film's considerable assets. It was less of an issue for me on subsequent viewings, but I still think it was unnecessary and perhaps even damaging to the movie to be *that* brutal.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

A big part of the design of the *John Wick* action is not just the gun fu but not to cut away. The main reason why we did that is we didn't have the money. And if we had more money, if we had $10 million or even $5 million more, I wonder if we still would've had those follow Keanu in a

oner through stuff with no cutting. I think we would've had a B, C camera, second unit, all that stuff. We would've covered the shit out of it. More days. I'm telling you, we'd shoot things—I'd see the schedule, and I'd be like, "Hold on … We're doing all that before lunch? There's no chance!" And Keanu would show up, and he would do it! And we would figure it out. Because we'd have one camera, and we would maybe cover it from another point of view. Keanu trained his ass off, it was so well rehearsed. The stuntmen were incredible. We pulled off things that, on a normal movie, would take three days, we did in half a day. That was out of necessity. We didn't have the money, and because we shot in New York, money was time. If you go overtime in New York, you're paying out the ass. It was always a sense of expediency. Economic expediency. Ultimately, it turned out to be an action aesthetic that people loved. And I love as well. We realized we could make that incredibly cool, but we also realized we couldn't find any other way to do it.

JONATHAN SELA
(director of photography, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

That was the one thing I would say makes a big difference with Chad and David. It's both them and, obviously, Keanu, but even *Atomic Blonde* is a good example with someone like Charlize Theron—someone who just really wants to do a good job. Essentially, it's like being a dancer. You're not really hurting anyone, so it's learning a choreography. It's a ballet of motion—it's a fight between two people, lifting them up, rotating; it's the same thing where you're just moving your body differently. Most people are like, "Ugh," to do fights. Well, no, if you're a good dancer, you're going to know how to do fights. That was the fun part. They could have gone the easy route and just gone, "Cut, cut, cut, cut," but they really didn't want to. They went, "This is what we've done all the time," which is the faking part, because two people are not going to really punch each other, hurt, and break their necks. That's the cheating of movies. This punch is going to look good this way, and this kick is going to look good that way. They wanted to choreograph things in a way that the audience would think, *Wow, this guy is really there, it's really him, he's really going through it.* You really feel it, especially with *Atomic Blonde,* and there's that big fighting sequence, and when it's done, you almost want to take a breath of fresh air. "Whoosh, that

was a lot.” You feel it as an audience. That was really important, to figure out ways to do stuff like that.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

Most modern action films are cut or edited in a very specific way, or a very fast or choppy way. Again, there are some directors and some editors out there that do it as an aesthetic. It’s a style. And then there’s others that do it because they’re trying to hide something or they didn’t prepare properly. We found that with a lot of action directors, it’s mostly you’re trying to hide the stunt double, you’re trying to hide the light, you’re trying to hide the set, you’re trying to hide the wires, you’re trying to hide the imperfections of performance, you’re trying to hide that you didn’t have enough prep time or the cameraman’s inability to capture the action. We decided we’re just going to prep. We have a big imagination, but it does come down to John Wick. So rather than have a scene where you have two guys in suits sitting in a room going, “John Wick was a badass; he did this,” we just decided we’re not going to do that, we’re just going to show you. And in order to show you that we have Keanu Reeves as John Wick, that means longer takes, bigger moves, driving a car, falling down stairs, and so on.

EVAN SCHIFF
(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

Fighting is dancing. It’s dancing that *looks* like fighting. And that is 100 percent how we approach it. It’s stunt choreography for a reason, and that informs the way that I cut it. Trying to make these sequences seem elegant, and part of that is by not overcutting them, not inserting an edit at the wrong spot, or inserting too many and drawing attention. We’re not trying to make people go, “Oh, I’m getting hit by all these fast cuts!” We want you to see that it’s fast and brutal, but it is a dance.

JONATHAN SELA

For me, it had nothing to do with camera moves or what was done in other action movies at all. I looked at composition and color. For every one

of us, it's a different element of the movie. For me, it was John Wick's loneliness, his character, the mystery, the underground part of the city. How do you see a part of New York that doesn't exist? As a storyteller, there is another part of the city, but we always see New York as New York. So I went towards these places. Is this the right location? How do we create this or that? *That's* what kind of drew me to it.

CHAD STAHELSKI

We wanted the audience to be transported into the world of John Wick, and that starts with your crew. You go, "Okay, this is the shot, this is what we're going to do," and your cinematographer is at the rehearsals, the wardrobe guys are at the rehearsals, the prop masters are at the rehearsals. So by the time we actually get to set, we're not wasting our time going, "How are we going to do this?" We're more about, "Let's do more takes. Let's find a more creative way to do it." The time is spent creatively and not logistically. And that starts as soon as we begin prep and location scouting. What that means is the stunt teams have to take Keanu and the other cast members and work not only on the physical skills but their performance skills, their memory skills, and rehearse not just with each other but the stunt teams, the cameraman, lighting guys—just work it as a really big live performance, which is fun. But it's a lot of work.

KEANU REEVES
(actor, "John Wick")

It's work, and it's fun, but it *is* work. I'm doing fake fights, and that takes a lot of commitment. And the longer takes are a little more demanding. It's a longer dance, and you just try not to suck.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

I was in Bulgaria doing *Expendables 3* when I got the call. I didn't go out with the initial *John Wick 1* crew; they had shot the fight in the house. I got a call from Chad when I was finishing *Expendables 3.* "Can you fly straight to New York? I have this shoot-out I need to do in a nightclub"—the Red Circle shoot-out. "I need your help with it, because we're stretched

so thin right now. I've got all my team doing something, and I need somebody to help me put together this gunfight." Because being a soldier, I am well versed in triangulating cross fire, ambushing cover versus concealment, linear ambushes, as opposed to L-shaped ambush or U-shaped ambush. And I understand the correcting malfunctions and counting your shots. So it's not like a John Woo movie anymore, where you got a hundred rounds in a pistol. You've got fifteen rounds and one in the chamber. On your sixteenth shot, after your sixteenth shot, you have to reload. So we stayed true to form on that.

I make it out to New York. Chad's shooting the final fight out in the rain with Dave and the boys, when John Wick is killing the old guy with the knife. I literally come from the airport, he gives me an address and says, "It starts at this nightclub. It's up in the VIP room. You've got to find a door. He's going to come through that door and work his way all the way across the top level. And then we want to have a fight at the end of the glass, and he gets thrown over the balcony." So I go to that nightclub, I give the bouncer a hundred-dollar bill, and he lets me in. I take my iPhone and I start walking through their building in what I think would be great gunfighting opportunities. Now this is a packed fucking nightclub. I'm walking through with my iPhone and my fingers, my gun fingers, in the foreground, like a first-person shooter, but knowing that it's going to be a reversed first-person shooter, because that's the *John Wick* style. It's a reverse first-person shooter, so you see Keanu Reeves doing it. It's a reverse first-person shooter; it wraps into a push, and then we let him out. So that began my involvement in the *John Wick* movies, because I went just to do that gunfight, and I was killed in that gunfight three or four times; I was a stunt guy in there as well. I started with Chad back in 1990, when I got out of the army; we started together as stuntmen. I knew what he was looking for, and I knew it was very, very similar to the style they were using, because I watched some of the house fight cut on Jon Eusebio's phone.

EVAN SCHIFF

Just as part of my research for a job, I'll find interviews with directors where they talk about their own influences and try to make sure I'm caught up on all of that. One of the things about editing is it doesn't really matter what's in the script or what they planned, the only thing that really matters

is what footage I have in front of me. I'm always a little bit wary of going in with too much of a plan for how something should be cut or what references should be made. For me, if we can assemble a good scene that happens to be an homage to Hong Kong films of the nineties or Sergio Leone films or something like that, then that's icing on the cake for me. My first instinct is always, "What can I do with this first?" And then maybe later, if there's an opportunity to add another layer of detail to it, I'll do that.

J. J. PERRY

When I got to the club, I knew exactly where to go, what to do. When the team came, we started embellishing on those ideas and creating some moments. But they had the wrong gear. They had a bad U-shaped leather holster that stuck, so it was hard for Keanu to get the pistol in and out of the holster. They were also using a silencer or a suppressor, which is technically something you wouldn't use. I mean, it sounds like it's a great idea as a hit man to be quiet, but you take a lot of velocity off of your round, and if you're in a crowded, noisy place, who gives a fuck if you're shooting a gun? So at the end of that, we ended up doing some stuff down on the floor that leads him into that. And we added some stuff on the dance floor when he first comes in.

EVAN SCHIFF

The novelty in those action sequences really comes from the stunts that Chad dreams up. One of the reasons that it doesn't feel like a movie you've seen before is that we're combining novel stunts, but also being merciless about the things that don't work. And there are certainly things, like in the green flashing light sequence in the Continental attack, that didn't work. There were a few moments where I felt Keanu doesn't look as spry as John Wick is supposed to. Because we're not starving for stunts, we're not starving for action, we're not under any obligation to include or exclude anything in particular, just the overall sequence needs to work. That gives us a lot of freedom to make sure that everything we're showing you is good and is new. With the Ghost Recon guys in *John Wick 3*, Chad was not interested in having these guys go down in a single shot. We've seen that in other movies, we've seen that in *John Wick* movies. For him, that was a novel thing. There's a very particular way to take these guys down, but it's

very labor intensive, and John's going to have to go through literally all the ammunition that he stocked up on. He goes through it all to take down just one wave of these guys—setting that up, that these guys are not easily killed by standard ammunition, even by John Wick. Then, getting into part 2, where it's the shotguns, and that's the great reloading scene with Lance [Reddick] and Keanu, and that very first guy where you realize that, "Oh, these shotguns are a whole other level. And that thing we've gotten you accustomed to seeing in round one doesn't apply anymore, because now in round two they're much better armed." It's that evolution of showing you something new and cool, but as soon as it's no longer new and cool, we're moving on to the next thing that's new and cool.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

The Red Circle was amazing, because that sequence, from start to finish, just kept growing and growing and growing. We rehearsed those sequences at 87eleven in the rehearsal space in New York and so on. We really dialed them in, but when we got [to the location], we find other new spots that we want to add stuff. So we'll end up adding a couple seconds here, a couple seconds there. We constantly choreograph on the fly as well, which is a really cool skill that I've developed with 87.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

In the first film, the first time you see him in full John Wick mode, for me, was the house invasion and then I guess the club scene.

JONATHAN SELA

It was a little spa downtown, I think in SoHo. It does not look like that. No misty windows, doesn't have blue, doesn't have ripples. You wanted this to feel like it could exist underneath this place. Again, it's an underground part of New York, so you have to look at these places and go, "How far can you push it and still believe it?" That was super fun. It's fun to go into the typical places and re-create them based on pictures we've seen, things we've read, movies we've seen. Then there was an opportunity to go, "Okay, we want to create that kind of idea, what exists in reality, and if we put this kind of stamp on it, is it going to work?" A lot of it is our

budget constraints. Our line producer was a nice guy, but it all was very difficult. A lot of it was an internal battle. “We can’t do that.” “Yes, we can! We’re going to find a way!” Then he’d come back and go, “No, no, you can’t do that.” So I think part of it was we were boxed in with some places, and when you get boxed in, most of the time, you have to become more creative or look for more solutions, and that leads to the right solution.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

We kind of had a blueprint for it, but we didn’t have it totally mapped out. The good thing is Keanu trained so well that we were able to do a lot of improvising. A lot of the stunts we see, Chad and David would just say, “Okay, we’re going to do that here.” And we had to somehow follow what they were doing, and then take all the action we were doing and make it fit in those little areas. Almost on the fly sometimes. And I think the chaotic-ness of that mixed with the club scene works.

JONATHAN SELA

We’re making a movie. We’re having a blast. There’s a million different ways to tell a story. There’s always an option. There’s enough tools. All of that is the fun part of my job, the fact that there’s not only one way. And sometimes the compromise is not that big. The more you stay open and go to creative places, you’ll find even better answers.

DEREK KOLSTAD

It’s all will, man. I’m forty-six. If you threw me on your shoulder and landed me on a mat, I’m just going to lie there and question choices I’ve made in my life for a while. But you watch Keanu work out, and he’s doing judo—he’s in phenomenal shape. Age gets us all, but he has a will. He’s just believing his way through the pain that he’s putting himself through.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR
(editor, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

It was such a joy doing that sequence. Playing with sound to give you a sense of space and giving each chapter a signature sound and feel. Downstairs in the bathroom when John drowns a guy in the sink, that’s almost like a thriller thing. He’s looking, but he doesn’t know, so you’re

playing with the thriller mode of it. When he gets into the bathhouse, he's almost like an animal getting closer to his prey. Just working with that element. It's almost like a love scene, if you think about it. There's a couple of guys in the way, but it's a predator/love kind of thing. He's so obsessed with getting to this guy, so playing it a little bit like a love sequence. And that's where the song "Think" by Kaleida really helped; that music took it to another level in my mind.

EVAN SCHIFF

I noticed criticism in a few places when *John Wick 2* came out that the playlist wasn't as good as it was in *John Wick 1*. Now working with the two directors, I do wonder, maybe that was a difference between Dave [Leitch] being around and then not being around. Between the two of them, Dave is a little bit more musically oriented. Chad loves all forms of culture, he loves dance music and everything, but I think his tastes tend to skew more classical—he likes classical music, he likes symphonic, he likes ballet. Dave is much more of a modern pop music kind of guy.

JONATHAN SELA

Every fight or every moment had a little story behind it. Even in the beginning in the house, it's all about tactics and silencers and how can he be as low as you can be, so you can have the sense of, "Where is this coming from?" Every time, there were moments where you wanted to be brutal and tactical. You wanted to feel that. But even though he's succeeding, he's still just a human being. Sometimes he's being fragile or being hurt—which were moments we were looking for. We were coming at it from wanting to hit different concepts of action, from the different settings. All was informed by what we found. Like, "Oh, look at this spa." But then it was, "How do you turn this spa into a club?" You look for places and think of how they can be different. You go to that place today and it doesn't have all the blue or the red light. You wouldn't even recognize it. So every place we went to, we looked at it with a whole different eye. That's what it looks like now, but what if we remake it into something else?

JACKSON SPIDELL

We really wanted to connect to this whole snake of the path that you're on, so we would go, "We have to get from here to there. All right, so there's this room in between, so why don't we add three guys? Well, if we do that, he's going to run out of bullets, so we're going to have to reload somewhere before we get to the next room. That will also change the bullet count in the next room." When we change all these things, we're keeping track of all the little things—where you'd have to reload, how many mags does he have left, will he have to steal a gun now?—in the choreography. It was cool, because then we would add little different reloads, and we'd try to come up with fancy ways of doing it that you wouldn't see ordinarily, but they're still practical. Like going in a crouch and putting the gun behind your knee, because you have two guns, so you reload both of them so you have a free hand. Things like that. We'd try to spice those up every once in a while, but when you'd change one thing, it would really be like a domino effect that other things would have to change throughout the choreography. It ended up just making it that much more unique in certain times.

BASIL IWANYK

The sequence in the club, the first area is well lit and he's hiding behind poles and shooting people, and then he goes into the actual club itself and is twisting around, shooting this way and that. It's a dance. It really is. We talked about that all the time. I think that kind of beauty appealed to people who weren't just fans of karate or martial arts or people shooting at each other. Even the move of shooting people in the face, and how they did it, it was a choreography that was just beautiful to watch. Watching the dailies, I was like, "This is incredible." Just the speed and the beauty of it—that's our DP and Keanu and, clearly, Chad and Dave and the stuntmen. It was just beautiful to watch.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

Keanu was really sick on the day where they shot that, and other things went wrong. It always does in filmmaking. And it's also part of the fun to figure it out and fix it. But there were certain things that went wrong when they shot that top level; they couldn't cover it completely and had to change the choreography. We also had some timing issues, both in the swimming area and the sauna, and had to deal with the geography of where people are.

So there were some problems because they couldn't cover it completely, but I don't think the film suffers for it. It's a beautiful sequence, and I think they solved it in some real innovative ways. It wasn't a nightmare. It was just some things we needed to figure out. And we did.

J. J. PERRY

I only did the Red Circle nightclub shoot-out, but when I left there, I was like, "Wow, that was really fucking cool." And then when I went to the editing room and watched it, I said, "This is next level." That's when Chad said, "If I do *Chapter 2*, what can we do to make it better?" You build John Wick a better outfit for a gunfight, because they had the wrong tools on, they had a bad holster. Like when you have a sports jacket on, you have to sweep the sports jacket to pull the pistol, and you can't struggle for it. Where do you keep the mags that you're going to reload? They have to be in a Kydex holster, not a leather holster in your pocket so you're digging for it. You have to give them a chance to succeed like the way that a real gunfighter would be set up.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The Red Circle. When I saw the first cut, I stood up laughing. Just cackling, going, "Ooooh!" I entered the arena with the fucking scenes I loved as a kid. That scene just made me ecstatic. I've loved all the action these guys have done, but there was something about the Red Circle. It wasn't a matter of "I've arrived," but it was like, "We did it!" It was just such a great, honest, innocent response. By the way, that little song he sings, that was Chad and Dave, man. That was their idea to come up with this little ditty. When they pitched it to me the first time, I was like, "I get it." But I didn't *get it* until I actually saw it, and I was like, "Oh." The subtext and juxtaposition of it all. But, man, it played so well.

BASIL IWANYK

There was one good move I made as a producer. When you don't have a lot of money to make a movie, everybody told me, "Shoot it in Cape Town, or Baton Rouge." And they're right, you'd have five or six million more dollars. But I wanted this movie to feel big, and I wanted it to feel gothic. I look at it differently: if I don't have a lot of money, and I shoot you

and an actor talking, it's small, but if I shoot it with the Brooklyn Bridge in the background, it feels like a big movie. Even though I'm just shooting two guys talking. If I shoot it in Toronto, it's against some fucking building, and it just feels small. I made the choice to shoot in New York. At the time, people were just like, "What are you doing? That's just not smart. It's so expensive to shoot there, you can't move locations." There's so many things you *can't* do in New York. But it has great actors that show up for a day. A lot of those actors were New York–based actors. Ian McShane we got because I said, "We're going to have you work two to three days, the last two days before Thanksgiving, and the first day after Thanksgiving, so you can spend Thanksgiving holiday in New York with your wife." And it was at least the veneer of "We're a classy joint." That was a big part of it, really shooting the shit out of New York and making it feel like a great gangster movie.

JONATHAN SELA

I've shot New York many times, mainly commercials and videos. *John Wick* was my first movie there. We spent a lot of weekends just walking downtown. "What if this would be the hotel? What if this?" Our production designer was from New York, so I think he took his approach of just what he knows naturally and then we came in with, "I don't know what's what. Let's look at this from a clean, fresh eye. Let's just try to keep making the best movie we can." So we kind of did a lot of that. Just kept looking at places on our own. "What about that place? What about this place?" Some of it was presented, and the other half we just kind of found ourselves. I remember walking along Broadway and just looking. "Oh, what's behind this theater? What's behind that one?" I did not expect this to be a cult project. We really wanted to make a great story, and we let it take what shape it needed to take.

BASIL IWANYK

Part of our thing was, we didn't understand why in the action genre, people didn't pay more attention to the aesthetic of it. The beauty of the shot. Why not pay attention to that? Why not pay attention to texture? Why not have a classy cast? I don't mean one of these, "Oh, look, there's Robert De Niro and Danny Huston and somebody else, and they must've paid him

a fortune.” We didn’t pay any of these people! I mean, we paid a little bit. But make it feel different. Give it a different texture. Those are all really conscious decisions to make it more elegant.

5 WITH A BULLET

"Whoever comes, whoever it is … I'll kill them. I'll kill them all."

John Wick *finished principal photography on December 20, 2013, just before the customary Christmas and New Year's break. And while the filmmakers came out of the experience of production feeling that things went far smoother than anyone could have anticipated given the myriad obstacles that had been in their path throughout preproduction, there was still a great deal of apprehension about the film including whether it would get a domestic theatrical release. It was that feeling that permeated the production as they entered postproduction on January 10, 2014, in which the creative team would lock a cut of the film and seek domestic theatrical distribution for the movie.*

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

We had around $30 million and Keanu Reeves—which is awesome, but it's *still* an independent feature. That thing was tailored together by any number of financial means, including Keanu throwing in some of his own cash. When it was set up at Lionsgate, it was a very minimal deal, and it was because it did so well in the secondary and tertiary markets that we got *Chapter 2.* And once *2* happened and *Chapter 3* happened, then it's its own beast. So when people go, "Of course you knew." Noooooooo—we had no idea, man.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

Postproduction was a big struggle. Remember, television has changed a lot since what I'm about to say, but if I gave you any kind of sense of what we all thought, Keanu was like, "I'm going to do television." Chad went to go shoot second unit of a Sacha Baron Cohen movie in South Africa. This wasn't, "Oh my God, we're sitting on gold." Everyone was like, "Time to activate plan B," because we just didn't know.

★ ★ ★

As the film began postproduction, its editor, Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir, began her work in earnest. Unlike your average big-budget tentpole of an action movie where reshoots are not only common but expected, John Wick *would only be able to utilize material filmed during principal photography, as there was no budget for reshoots and pickups.*

DEREK KOLSTAD

In every action movie, you just randomly fucking kill everybody, but when [John] comes up behind Francis outside the club, and they know each other, he's like, "You've lost weight. Take the night off." I loved that. There was another scene right before that, where the Russian kid drives into Aurelio's garage. In the first draft, the garage opens and there's these two old Latino guys, tatted up, by the door, sitting on the other side. The garage door opens, the car enters, they look at the car, they look at each other, they stand, and they walk away. That is still my favorite scene, and it wasn't shot. We missed the timing of the day. But I always loved those scenes alluding to something greater than the scene itself.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR
(editor, *John Wick*)

You have to discuss the conflicts in the editorial process. And sometimes you have to climb on the table and laugh to just get your point out. But it was one of my best experiences. I wish I could repeat it every year.

BASIL IWANYK

The thing about editing the *John Wick* movies is that until you're about three or four minutes to the ultimate running time, they are actually extraordinarily painful to watch. There's too much action, so it becomes mind-numbing, the cumulative effect of it. By the end, you're just like, "Fuck this movie." Too many shots of cars or Keanu Reeves walking or walking upstairs or leaving rooms. It drives you nuts. Too much of that kind of tone, you start getting annoyed by it. So we were making such small steps, and the movie just didn't work. Our editor was like, "Give me a chance, I think I could cut about ten minutes out of here." And by the way, I'd say this happens in about 80 percent of the editorial process of any movie. At a certain point, the director goes, "I just need to disengage," and the editor comes in and shows him some cut. And she showed us a cut, and I'm like, "Holy shit! This is good!" I watch these cooking shows, and all these elements of a plate come together at the last minute, and you're like, "Oh my God, *that's* why you were cooking those mushrooms." Well, I'm like, "Wow, this works. This is cool."

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

The main thing is, you have to stay true to the story. Even though this all has to be portrayed, you have to do it precisely as you can, because you want to get to the action. We're still making an action movie. You have a half-an-hour crying movie about a man who lost his wife and got a dog. Well, you can't spend half an hour telling that story. No matter how passionate that would be, you're still catering to an audience that's here to see an action movie. And because we're not making an action movie/kitchen drama, we are elevating the action drama. You go into it knowing that it has to be precise. And in the process of trying out stuff, I like to go to the edge. First you make it long, then you go right to the edge where it's almost too far, then you balance it a bit more. But try always to take things as far as possible before it becomes a mess.

BASIL IWANYK

There came a point where we said, "Okay, we need to preview the movie." I showed it to a couple of people, and they were lukewarm on it. But I'm like, "Okay, let's show it to civilians, because maybe they'll be

more forgiving of it." We went down to Orange County, California. Chad and Dave had never been to a preview before.

I remember when I did *The Town*, it never previewed well, because no matter what, a third of the audience would go, "I don't support these bank robbers shooting at cops, so I have a problem with the movie." So we would take them out, and just listen to the people who didn't have a moral problem with the cops being shot at. I said, "Guys, there will be a group of people in this audience who will say, 'We have issues with violence to the animal, and we have a bigger issue to all this killing because of an animal.' We'll put all them aside, and we'll just pay attention to the people who love the movie." And they were like, "That sounds ominous." "It's going to be ominous. This is the first one."

And we're watching the movie, no one knows what the hell it's supposed to be. Literally, nobody has any idea what the fuck this is. Remember, it was a longer version, too, and there was the wife and the dog and the brooding. And then there's the scene where—I'll never forget this in my entire career, literally until the day I die—Michael Nyqvist calls John Leguizamo and says, "Why did you hit my son?" in a menacing tone. And Leguizamo goes, "He stole John Wick's car and killed his dog." And Michael Nyqvist goes, "Oh." The entire fucking theater erupted in laughter and cheers. And the audience realized, "I'm allowed to have fun with this." And we had them. I'm telling you, we had them. Every single moment afterwards. It was incredible! They realized, "This is supposed to be fun!" God bless Michael Nyqvist.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

We did really, really well in test screenings.

BASIL IWANYK

We never tested again. We wrapped it up, and I'm like, "We're going to be rich. This is going to be the happy ending. I'm such a good producer, and I'm so ballsy, we're going to finish the movie, we're going to deliver it, and when we deliver it, I'm going to show it to people and be like, 'Voilà!'" We show it [for distribution] and CAA represents it, and they were like, "We're going to take it to the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood, we're going to show it to everybody, we're not going to show it to individual people, we're

going to show it to everybody at once." Which is kind of a douche thing to do, because you've got to get everybody to drive over there. So we showed it, and … *it was a disaster.* In fact, there was a Fox acquisition executive that was sitting in the middle row in the middle seat that got up like half an hour into the movie and walked out because he hated it. And all that kind of disruption, because when someone walks out of a theater, everyone has to stand up and all that. Anyway, we didn't get one offer for the movie. Everybody passed. Except for Lionsgate. Who offered us no money up front, bottom release commitment, and that was it. Even then, I only had *Sicario,* which I produced right after *John Wick,* and all I could say was, "Okay, *John Wick* will come out, it will play on streaming, or direct to video, at least I have *Sicario.* As long as I get through *John Wick,* where no one notices it, who cares?" Because it's not like it was going to be a big Warner Bros. thing.

And then, I get a call from Tim Palen, head of marketing at Lionsgate, and he says, "I cut a trailer for *John Wick.* I think it's awesome." Now, we screened the movie in the summer. They closed the deal in August. He gave us this trailer, and the trailer *was* awesome. He put it out, the internet started getting excited about it. He had a release date of early October, we went to the Austin Film Festival, Fantastic Fest, we showed it to them, they loved it. Went bananas for it. And we were like, "Okay, we have something here." We only opened up at $12.5 million, but there were articles about, "This Keanu Reeves movie is 100% on Rotten Tomatoes." Which we did have, for like a month—100 percent. I have so many screen grabs of it. That's how it started.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

I don't regret anything we put on the [cutting room] floor. Nothing. And it was quite a lot. A lot of it was dialogue. I like cutting out dialogue. Not because it's not good, it's just because when it's on the page, it's perfect. When you have the actors embody it, you have all the props and the sets and the lighting and everything, so a lot of dialogue becomes redundant. It's all set and the look or an aside. John Wick hardly says anything until he gives that speech, when he's tied to the chair. And I like that. I think that's one of his charms. He becomes this mysterious figure.

And the audience isn’t an unwritten page; they come with baggage. They’ve seen all those movies, so you don’t have to explain everything to them.

BASIL IWANYK

What I loved about [Lionsgate’s president of acquisitions and coproductions] Jason Constantine—he was the guy who really spearheaded Lionsgate to buy this—is he said, “I like it. Hopefully, someone else will like it.” And there was no bigger fanboy of *John Wick* than Jason. He’s literally the keeper of the flame.

DEREK KOLSTAD

I love revisionist history where I meet certain people who had the opportunity [to acquire the film] and said no, and now they’re like, “Ugh, I wanted it so bad.” And you have to go, “Hmm, *did you*? I have that email, dude.” But ultimately, it was Lionsgate and Jason Constantine who gave us the franchise; he was the guy who was like, “We need two of them.” But before that, when it was finally set up at Lionsgate, it was no money and a certain amount of funds that would be spent on P&A. When it had its opening weekend, it was slated to do $7–$9 million, but when it came in at $14–$15 million, we were like, “Oh, okay, cool!” When it ended its theatrical run at what it did, we were happy, because *then* you had a career. You had a movie get made, and it didn’t completely suck. Welcome to Hollywood.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

I knew. And I told the producer one night when we were shooting exteriors, “You know, this is going to become a cult movie.” I knew there were certain things that were discussed in detail and certain things they didn’t get through. Like one of the female assassins, they weren’t allowed to beat her up like Charlize was in *Atomic Blonde.* They weren’t allowed to do that, because they felt it was too violent towards women. There was stuff like that. And I remember one time telling the producers, “Just leave them alone. It’s going to become a cult movie if you just leave them alone.”

DEREK KOLSTAD

I can’t remember who it was, but the first review that came in was negative. And it was pretentious as shit. His last line was, “But, if you like movies like this, and you like Keanu, you’re gonna love it.” And I’m like, “Lead with that, motherfucker!” At the end of it? We knew what we were doing. It’s like, “Hey, we built a sandbox, we built it with clean sand, come in. We’re gonna play.” It’s everything we want to do in that space.

★ ★ ★

While the name John Wick is now almost as iconic as Rocky or Rambo, the title of the movie was only officially coined late in the process of making the first film, its original title having been Scorn*, which sounds like it could have been any number of third-rate thriller/action films from the past. Or even a bad* Fatal Attraction*–ish erotic thriller circa 1987.*

DEREK KOLSTAD

I’m not a title guy and never have been one. The name of everyone from *The Dirty Dozen* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* have made their way into any number of screenplays. I named the character John Wick after my grandfather, and then I called his wife, Helen, after my grandmother. The reason it became *John Wick* is that Keanu was having such a great time with it and he kept referring to it as *John Wick,* and the marketing guys at Lionsgate were like, “This is like seven million dollars in free press. It’s called *John Wick.*” And *that’s* how it came to be.

BASIL IWANYK

We got rid of *Scorn* early on. Keanu hated the name. We called it *John Wick* as a working title, and then, as a lot of working titles, it just stuck.

DEREK KOLSTAD

When the movie came out, my grandmother had just passed. We were all very close, so when my cousins saw the movie, this was John saying goodbye to Helen, and *they* were the people in the movie theater crying. I’m getting texts saying, “Jesus, Derek, you could’ve given us the heads-up!” My grandfather is still alive at ninety-two, and he has not seen the movie. Hasn’t seen an R-rated movie since *The Piano,* which I remember him

saying had a lot of penis. I'm not an emotional guy, but my mom had sent me this little news piece, and I remember playing it on my phone, and it kind of summed up our relationship. My grandfather built a company from scratch, self-made man, but he is laser-focused in everything. And his response to this is, "I know Derek loves this, and he's worked hard to get it, and I'm just happy he's got it." *That* is my grandfather. It's a joy this holds his name. And one more reason why as these things progress and I'm detached from it in some respect, I just want nothing but the best for it. One of the things I've always liked in the process of creating characters is you have connections to everyone. Even the characters you hate and you want to kill, you still kind of love and want to root for in a certain capacity.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

John Wick 1 came at a time in Keanu's life—in his career; I won't say his life—when it was important that he did something significant. For Chad and Dave to see that script and have the vision to *know* … All of it was being at the right place at the right time with the right actor and the right directors and the right action and the right story. It was a $20 million or $22 million budget that absolutely smashed it.

DEREK KOLSTAD

That's what's so funny about *John Wick*, and I'm sure so many writers have said this before. But when I saw the first cut and came home, Sonja asked, "How was it?" I remember saying, "I have no idea." And it's true. We had been through so many drafts, I'd seen, up to that point, so many scenes, been in the editing bay and all that kind of stuff, and it wasn't until we saw it with an audience down at the ArcLight Cinerama Dome, which is a big screen, lots of seats. I pinpointed the people who didn't want to be there. One of the guys was in his late fifties, there with his kids or whatever, and you could see him go, "Whatever." Dog gets killed, and he goes, "Whoa." And then when you get to the house invasion, he's on the edge of his seat. And suddenly, he was just going through that popcorn. I remember being there in any number of scenes. First rated-R movie I ever saw in the theater was *Predator,* and it scared the shit out of me. Holy crap, going

home at the end of that movie, saying, “I’ve never seen anything like that. I hope all movies are like that.” Sadly, the next two or three movies tried to, but they all kinda sucked.

BASIL IWANYK

I don’t remember the exact number, but somebody at Lionsgate told me, “It’s performing at the same level as a $140 million domestic box office movie.” It was insane how well it was performing. I’ll hand it to Lionsgate—Jason Constantine, Michael Burns, Jon Feltheimer, Patrick Wachsberger, Rob Friedman—they all came to us and said, “Should we do another one?” I don’t want to sound like we were falsely modest, but I think we all thought, *Wow, we got away with it. That’s awesome.*

Barry Sonnenfeld hated flying and used to tell people, “When I get off a plane, I consider it a failed suicide attempt.” This was kind of like a failed career-suicide attempt. And Lionsgate’s like, “What else do you got?”

Once that happened, we were as shocked as anyone else. In fact, I think Dave moved on, because Dave thought like everyone else, “Okay, we got away with one.” And Chad, I have to hand it to him, is like, “I know how to expand the world. Let’s keep going.” Same thing with Keanu. Keanu legitimately loved playing John Wick. Legitimately loved being that man. He was so excited to go back. And you have to remember, Keanu’s not a sequel guy, but he loved playing that character. He loved talking about that world. Same with me, same with Chad, same with [producer] Erica Lee. So Lionsgate is the one that pushed us towards it. It wasn’t us going in and saying, “Look at these numbers. Let’s do it again!” Once they asked if this was something we thought we could do, we looked around and were like, “Fuck yeah!” And we did.

6 CONTINENTAL DIVIDE: JOHN WICK, CHAPTER 2

"You wanted me back … I'm back!"

With John Wick *in theaters and embraced by critics and fans alike, the creative team was able to breathe a sigh of relief. Their little movie that could … did. The success of* John Wick *in both theaters and ancillary markets (over $86 million in worldwide box office, and over $44 million in home video sales on a production budget of $20 million) convinced Lionsgate this film was worthy of a sequel. But the question for the creatives was: Is there a sequel worthy of this movie?*

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4)*

When I was an executive at Warners, I worked on *Fugitive 2*, which was titled *U.S. Marshals*, and it was just absurd. You're kind of going, "What are we doing here? You're just rehashing the same stuff." Though I think *U.S. Marshals* was the first movie to dethrone *Titanic* after, like, seven months at number one. It had Tommy Lee Jones, Wesley Snipes when Wesley was cuckoo, and Robert Downey Jr. when Downey was super-cuckoo—you can only imagine that set.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

The success of the first film was a little bit shocking afterwards. We made it with the intent of doing a somewhat artsy genre film—an action

film that was a bit of a throwback to some of the seventies stuff that Keanu, myself, and my partner would like. And then to have the response that we did was very, very flattering. And when they asked us to do a second one, I thought it was a great opportunity. Keanu wanted to do it. It was just a matter of finding a story and a way to expand the world that we found very interesting.

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

A lot of times, when I pitch a TV show and I'm going to write it, I'm hired to write the pilot and episode two, and I would argue that episode two is far more important. How many shows have you watched episode one and are like, "Cool!" and then you start watching episode two and are like, "Eh, I'll get back to it," and you never do. That's the same that goes for franchises. It's one of those reasons that *Empire Strikes Back* is, for guys my age, their favorite *Star Wars* movie, because it proved, "Hey, this isn't a one-hit wonder. This is going somewhere."

CHAD STAHELSKI

What we wanted to do with the sequel was really about world expansion and how to make the action a little bit bigger, but at the same time interesting and to go in a different route. It was about action design and how we can add a little bit more brutality, I guess, to the action. We wanted to give a rhythm of building you up with the action and then bring you down a little bit with the humor. At the same time, let the audience know that we're not taking ourselves too seriously.

★ ★ ★

Given how unexpected the success of the first film was, the green light of the sequel came quickly, and preproduction began in earnest in early 2015. An essential element to ensure a quick turnaround was that all parties involved agreed the same creative team should return for the sequel.

DEREK KOLSTAD:

The first *John Wick* did okay theatrically, but it was the home video division of Lionsgate saying, "We need *John Wick 2*." They're like, "At what number?" Then at that number it became a theatrical thing, bing-bang-boom. Now I've been involved with *John Wick* for only six years when you think about it, yet it's been one of the hardest things I've ever done. But it's been a joy, too, because it's given me this career. And for a guy who just loves kung fu, gun-kata from the nineties, where if I shoot you, you go flying back through the window and cartwheel out to the street, now I've got the opportunity to be known not as the "violent guy" but as the "world-building guy." It's fucking cool, man. I love it.

★ ★ ★

While early development on John Wick 2 *included David Leitch, with the Hollywood trade papers reporting in early 2015 that he would return to codirect the sequel along with Chad Stahelski, by the summer, Leitch elected to step away from the production and focus on a new action-thriller,* Atomic Blonde, *and later,* Deadpool 2.

DAVID LEITCH
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *Deadpool 2, Bullet Train,* and *Atomic Blonde*)

I'd get asked a lot of questions about *Deadpool,* but never, "Are you daunted by doing the sequel?" Look, I didn't even do the sequel to *John Wick.* Chad and I had discussed where we wanted to go with it, and we were really all trying to scratch our heads about what the next chapter would be, and I said, "If I can't find my way in, I really want to explore *Atomic Blonde.*"

BASIL IWANYK

We didn't have Dave. Chad was thrown by that. We had a new DP [director of photography], which is a big part of the process. A new production designer, a new editor. So we just didn't know. We had no idea if this was going to work.

EVAN SCHIFF

(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

The thing that's come to be pretty clear is that the part of the *John Wick* world that everybody loves comes only from Chad's head. You can't fire Chad and replace him with another director and expect to get a *John Wick* movie. Those weird ideas—the weirdness that makes it so fun to watch *John Wick*, plus, obviously, the crazy stunts and fighting—all come from him. And he is—of everybody in the movie except Keanu, I guess—the non-replaceable person.

★ ★ ★

The script development continued into the summer of 2015 as the filmmakers secured financing and international distribution at the annual film market at Cannes and sought to enrich the world of John Wick *with not only new characters but by leaving New York and heading to new locations in Rome, offering the same globetrotting appeal as the James Bond films have for decades.*

EVAN SCHIFF

I went to Rome for a couple weeks of prep before they started shooting, because that was a good time for Chad and I to get some actual one-on-one time together. Once they started shooting, I stayed around for a day, and then I flew back to New York and finished the edit there. Our pipeline was set up for that more than it was for me to work from Rome.

DAN LAUSTSEN
(director of photography, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

The problem is, when you're coming to a city like Rome, you have to trust your scouts. You know, "Show us something we haven't seen before." And then people are showing us something we *have* seen before, so you have to be pushing and pushing, "We don't like that, let's see something else." Chad is amazing in that way, because he's not taking a no. He just says, "Keep going and look for locations." That staircase fight in *Chapter 2*, I think it took us months to find that staircase, because Chad wanted us to have a longer and longer staircase.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

The biggest thing that I get asked about is the stair fall that me and Danny Graham did in Rome; the stair fall that just never ends. It's one of my favorites, because it just went so many places and ended so awesomely, crashing through the glass, sliding on the ground, and then all of a sudden they just get up and are like, "Drink? Drink? Okay, cool." *Such* a great ending.

EVAN SCHIFF

I know a fraction of the references that are in these films. On *Wick 3*, Chad wanted to put *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* on the video screen in Times Square, but we couldn't license it. A lot of the references are in the production design—the statues he chooses to have in the background behind the characters, or the paintings. Chad's a big Caravaggio fan. When we were shooting in the Italian national art gallery in Rome, the placement of paintings and what's visible is very intentional and meaningful for Chad.

DAN LAUSTSEN

When we shot in Rome, some of it was shot in the museum. I think the reason for that was you always hear about how the museums have so little money, so they want to get some more money out of the big American movie. But we're not allowed to attach anything to anything, so the lighting was a challenge. Then of course, the reason we came up with these LED stripes around the walls and stuff like that was just to break it up. And again, just to think outside the box—try to do something you haven't seen before. It's playing into the scene.

DEREK KOLSTAD

John Wick 2 was the hardest thing I've ever done, just because suddenly it's a success and then there's ego, changes in personalities, the studio going through different hands, and all that kind of stuff. On the first one it was, "Hey, we're all in this boat together." In the second one, it's all of us outside the boat, holding on to the boat, going, "I don't understand this storm." But then, going into the third one, when they came back to me, it was like, "I understand this now!" It was literally like helping build the

boat, standing on the shore, saying, “God’s blessings be upon you.” I’m still involved with some of these kinds of things, but to be involved in three of these kinds of things is fucking rare from a writer’s standpoint. And so you wish it well.

BASIL IWANYK

Finding the story for *John Wick 2* was extraordinarily hard, because we didn’t have the dog to go back to. That was the thing over and over again. “Can this franchise last without the dog?” People would joke, “Oh, don’t you have a cat or a turtle?” We couldn’t just do something like that. We would have writers’ rooms of really great, commercial, important writers sit around going, “Any ideas?” Because we didn’t know. We had no idea what to do.

DEREK KOLSTAD

We went through so many iterations of the sequel story, but we landed on pretty much *The Gauntlet.* He’s gotta get from point A to point B. It’s *16 Blocks* with friends and foes along the way. That kind of thing. And then ending the way that they did, it’s very much a Chad-ism that we’ve earned this moment—and he was right. He and I don’t often have pushback between one another, because we understand where the other one’s coming from, but when John shot that guy in the Continental, I was like, “Where do we go from here?” And he was right ending it in such a way. I pushed back in *3* with like, “If Keanu cuts off his finger, you’re giving a headache to the VFX guys for the entirety of this franchise.” And yet, watching that with the audience, seeing them say, “Oh shit, he was willing to do this thing,” I got cool with it.

BASIL IWANYK

Here’s the irony of that whole thing. Chad wanted a different dog at the end of *John Wick 1*. A different type of dog to the one that we had. And he was talked out of it by Dave Leitch, but he’s constantly cursing Dave: “I’m stuck with this fucking dog all these movies later.” I’m convinced that this asshole Chad cut off John Wick’s finger, because he didn’t want a *John Wick 4.* He was like, “Fuck it, I’m done, we’re done.” And now I think he’s

even angry at himself. You know, “Damn it, I’m stuck with this missing finger!” It *so* enraged us.

★ ★ ★

One of the ideas for a sequel was the notion of doing a “surprise” prequel that the audience wouldn’t realize until the end of the third act when it would become clear the film was a prequel and not a sequel. The idea was quickly abandoned.

DEREK KOLSTAD

At that point, you realize, “Holy shit, this is the Impossible Task he had to perform!” That didn’t go anywhere. Then we had the Irish Mob, the Nigerian Mob—you name a mob, we had it. But one heart and soul of all the rewrites was, “Why don’t you do a *Bonnie and Clyde* thing and he gets his fucking car back?” One of the things we always talked about, but we couldn’t do because it was too much of a wink and a nod, is John gets out clean with his car and they take off his side-view mirror. He says, “Fuck it, you’re all dead,” but we *did* go with a variation of that, because the car fu and the gun fu is such a great answer to the question. It’s the perfect way back into the world.

BASIL IWANYK

We didn’t get the script for the second film together until the very last minute. It was a tough one. We couldn’t get there with Derek, who’s a terrific writer, but at a certain point, you run out of ideas, so we brought this writer in, Joby Harold. What we had with Derek was a million different ideas, and Joby came in *not* saying, “Here are all these cool new ideas,” but rather, “Here is how you take all these random ideas and actually lay them out to a cogent narrative that makes sense.” The thing about the *John Wick* movies is they almost go against a lot of screenwriting rules. Usually, screenwriting starts from the outside and goes inwards. We start with the small, and then we build out. And on *John Wick 2* the only ideas we had were, “We want to have Italy, and we want a mirrored room.” Maybe we had another idea of Winston or something, but we would just grow from

there. But it always surprises people who say, “What? That’s all you’ve got?” We grew it out from these small ideas, but it was unwieldy.

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

In crafting a sequel to *John Wick,* the filmmakers made two terrific creative decisions: The first was to make this a direct continuation of the first movie—the story picks up right where the last one left off, with John accomplishing the one thing we didn’t see him do in the original: get his stolen car back. He then does what he said he would do at the end of the first picture; he goes home with his new dog, reburies his guns and other assassin accoutrements, and then returns to his retired life so he can continue to mourn his late wife.

However, having emerged from retirement in the first film, Wick finds his old life isn’t ready to let go of him again. He receives a visit from Santino D’Antonio, an old ally to whom Wick owes a debt. D’Antonio wants Wick to pay the debt by assassinating his sister, Gianna, a fellow crime boss who is about to ascend to the High Table, the underworld’s ruling council. With his sister dead, D’Antonio will be able to take her place and consolidate his power and his position. Wick refuses D’Antonio’s request, saying he is done with that life. But D’Antonio won’t take *no* for an answer and burns down Wick’s house. Having now lost all that is dear to him (his wife, his dog, his car, and now his home), Wick realizes he must do as D’Antonio asks if there is to be any chance of him returning to retirement. And so the adventure begun in the first movie carries on in this one without missing a beat.

DEREK KOLSTAD

What we wanted from Gianna is that we alluded to the fact that she and John had had a relationship. Not sexual but more like favorite cousins. We allude to so much there with the High Table and all of that. That scene was rewritten so much, and it wasn’t until we cast her that it fell into place. You want it to be gracious, but you don’t want John to just walk in and go, “Well, I’ve got a marker. Boom. Fuck you.” It didn’t make any sense. But when she goes, “Fuck you, I’m taking my life,” that was great, but it’s another scene that just took forever to get together.

CHAD STAHELSKI

Everything is an evolution, like the bath scene with Gianna. It's like *this* is what the scene needs to mean, this is information we have to get out, this is the vibe and tone we want it to be, and that's all written in the tone of the dialogue. Take John from the music to the feeling that's evolved after the catacombs. After he does something, he does the ask he's supposed to do, but he's very melancholy about it. Very sad. We have to emote that, and then *that* brings us into the action scene. That's all pretty scripted.

RAY MORTON

The second was to develop the most original narrative element of the first movie. Most of the narrative elements in *John Wick* were not particularly original; we have seen countless movies about hit men, Russian gangsters, and revenge before. The one original story element in the first film was the Continental and its accompanying suggestion that there is an elaborate secret underworld that exists just below the surface of our own. *John Wick: Chapter 2* takes this notion and runs with it.

In this picture, we learn that that secret underworld is much more extensive, much more elaborate, and much weirder than anything we saw in the parent picture. We now learn that New York Continental is not a single entity but just one of many such establishments all over the world. We learn that the criminal underworld does not just consist of Russian and Italian mobsters but many more and more eccentric factions, including the Bowery King and his army of street people factotums. We learn that the fraternity of assassins and criminals has many more rules, rituals, and protocols, including the blood marker and a central control center featuring tech from all ages, than we first realized.

In the first movie, the Continental and the underworld seemed to be just an eccentric, rather unrealistic element in a film that was otherwise set in a highly stylized version of the real world. In *Chapter 2*, it becomes clear that the saga of John Wick is actually set in its own very elaborate and well-realized fantasy world. And this now allowed the story to go any unpredictable place it wanted to go without having to subject itself to the strictures of our reality.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Chapter 2 changed so much from draft to draft, but the one thing that never changed that we loved was the idea of the marker, because I always loved in old movies where someone would say, “You gave me your word. It’s a blood oath.” But this was more important: What if you gave your blood oath, but it was part of a legal structure overlooked by the Continental? Well, there’s fucked up and then there’s *really* fucked up. So the idea that John gave this marker to this guy and he’s calling it in, that *never* changed. The race, ethnicity, and creed of the bad guy went any number of different ways, but that stayed. Chad knows what he wants, yet at the same time, he recognizes, “Okay, that cornerstone is a cornerstone. Don’t move that. That stays.” Once you can just work within it, that’s a joy. But for John, redeeming that marker is like, “I can’t do that to Helen.” Helen in my head, in all of our heads, has no idea about this life. To me, John Wick is the guy who got salvation, but didn’t really deserve it, and when it was taken from him, suddenly, he had to regain it. Which is a fucked-up journey.

In thinking about these characters, I look at a show like *Justified,* which I love. At the very end, he’s put the Big Bad away. He had the chance to kill him, but didn’t, and the Big Bad asks him why he didn’t. And the good guy doesn’t respond, so the bad guy goes, “Is it because we dug coal together?” I think *that* is why John still has people in his life that he does. It isn’t a matter of them owing him, but it’s kind of like they went to the same high school together or you went to the military together or started out in the mail room together. There is just this sense of, “Okay, look. We are bad guys. There’s loyalty and morality, but, goddamn it, you were there when my moral compass came into play, and you are part of it.” Chad loves to paint himself into a corner and figures his way out every time. And with John, you don’t want him to go too far. He’s gone really, really far and pushed up against that line, but, again, you don’t want him to go too far. So that’s where the balance is had and where the challenging fun is made.

★ ★ ★

Unlike such inert eighties action sequels as Another 48 Hours *and* Beverly Hills Cop 2, *part of the challenge—and the thrill—for any sequel is to see the world of the first film extrapolated upon. New recurring franchise*

*characters were added, including the Bowery King, played by Laurence Fishburne (*The Matrix, Event Horizon*), and the gun/weapon Sommelier, played by Peter Serafinowicz (*The Tick, Guardians of the Galaxy*). And then there were a diverse array of newcomers to the* John Wick *universe like Ruby Rose as Ares, Italian film legend Franco Nero as Julius, and rapper-turned-actor Common rounding off the new ensemble for the film memorably as Cassian. All of whom joined returning stars Keanu Reeves, Ian McShane as Winston, and Lance Reddick as Charon.*

DEREK KOLSTAD

I met Ruby Rose once on the production. I was working on a rewrite, and she was walking by the office. She came in and says, "So you're the fucking cunt who wrote this." And I was like, "Yes, yes, I am!" and she walked away. For as tiny as she is, man, she's got a presence. And the silence of the character in the film is what gravitated her to the role. In the original draft of the script, there was a character who was a "nameless goon," but Chad and I kept talking about her. In my head, she's not mute; she got shot in the neck, but she knows sign language. And how cool is it that John just happens to know sign language?

JACKSON SPIDELL

There was a lot of really intricate choreography that Common trained his ass off for. He knew he had to step up to go against Keanu with his character. And he did. He was in the gym all the time, and between his start to his finish, he made so much progress and he just really had a lot of heart going into it, which was amazing.

KEANU REEVES
(actor, "John Wick")

I don't know any real jujitsu, judo, or anything like that. I do movie kung fu, but with that, you can fake a punch, but you can't really fake a judo throw. You can get help from the person who you're throwing, because they can kind of launch themselves—thank you, Common. At the same time, Common got really good at throwing people, too, so it's really a cooperation. In the real world, I don't do any of that.

COMMON
(actor, “Cassian”)

As far as I’m concerned, in the real world, I feel like I can kick ass. They watched what I could do and then took me back to the basics at 87eleven, and I just learned so much. It was a lot of work, but I wanted Chad to know that I was committed, that I was going to give my heart and soul to this. And getting to work with Keanu and seeing how he would come in every day after doing all these different scenes and having all this work to do and other things, like fight coordination, just bringing 110 percent. I have this perfectionist in me that Keanu has, and every time we were rehearsing, we didn’t end it on the right note.

KEANU REEVES

We had to get the flavor.

COMMON

The best and most joyous part about this is that we could get everything and the flavor right, but once it gets to Chad on the day off, he’ll flip it on you, and you better be ready. I was looking at our characters as rivals, but we also have a reverence and respect for each other. Once John Wick crossed the line and made Cassian do what he has to do, that’s when you see the intensity and that kind of strength come out. It’s up to the visionaries if Cassian and I would be back.

CHAD STAHELSKI

We like being slightly ambiguous in this world. A big part of John Wick’s world is to let the audience kind of take a guess at what’s going to happen.

KEANU REEVES

In *John Wick,* there’s the underworld, and the underworld has its own rules and codes and ethics. One of them is that there’ll be no business done on Continental grounds. Common, who plays the assassin Cassian, and I fight and then we crash into the Continental, and then Franco Nero says, “Gentlemen, go have a drink at the bar.” And we do. So it’s kind of cool to

just be trying to kill each other and then go have a drink at the bar. It was a really fun scene to do.

CHAD STAHELSKI

For me, it's more about the high and the low. That moment when they stop fighting to have a drink is a great one. That's fun and a good break in the Continental. All that ferocity, all that trying to kill each other to conclude in that beat? That was great fun. Or when he gets back from Rome and all of New York is after him and he fights the violinist and all these other guys, he does some work with a pencil, and the payoff of his making his way through that whole gauntlet is meeting a new character in the form of the Bowery King, the man, the myth, the legend. That's what the payoff is. Or, "Hey, man, you got a quarter?" and a homeless guy shoots him, and that ends up building you up for the action to take you down. The catacombs? What was the payoff for that? Getting hit by a car by Common, and he then disappeared. So every action sequence was built with a payoff. You end up saying, "Oh, that was kind of funny," even though he shot thirty-seven guys in the face.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The other thing is I always loved the notion of private clubs. In the movies of the seventies and eighties, you always threw a playing card up to the glass or had a secret handshake. That's always been part of it. Usually when you look at an onion, you peel down, but as the franchise progresses, Chad would always encourage me to peel *up*. It was, "What if there's an onion above?" And that was the High Table, that was Common, that was Ares, that was all these characters. I love the movie *Ronin*, and if I could make one movie every year for the rest of my life, it's that. All of us here have something like that. I love this scene where Harry says, "Do I know you by way of the German?" And it never comes up again, but just that one little line grows the world a little bigger. Those moments are like, "Holy shit!" It's bigger than the movie itself. We always focus on that. Honestly, *Miller's Crossing* is the movie that intimidates me the most and I love the most and I watch every year. But you watch those movies, and every time, you see something different. And that was always our aim. Not to be the douchebag going, "Look at all these seeds," but instead doing, "Here's the

world. And it’s not just the world of one guy saying one thing, it’s everyone saying this one thing.”

RAY MORTON

I have always hated the clichéd movie character of the elegant, high-end hit man in a natty suit and tie. It’s a cliché that got its start in Don Siegel’s 1964 version of *The Killers* and was obviously ramped up in *Pulp Fiction* and then recycled in every Tarantino rip-off made in the almost thirty years since. The idea of a guy who commits murder for hire being a cultured, cool-edge, tech-savvy sophisticate is laugh-out-loud funny, especially when you compare them to real-life hit men, who are usually low-life morons or fat guys who dress like slobs, have socks around their ankles, drive beat-up Cadillacs, and hang out in front of Brooklyn social clubs when they’re not out whacking people or peddling black market cigarettes. *John Wick* makes this cliché palatable by taking it to absurd extremes—the guests of the Continental are not just high end, they are the 1 percent of the 1 percent and so are impossible to resist.

DEREK KOLSTAD

In the first one, the idea was the only time the coin was used was to get in the door, and then you’re given the coin back. Because who pays an $1,800 fucking cover charge, you know? But from here on out, we actually tapped into it there at the beginning with Winston—it’s not the fiscal value of the coin, it’s the coin itself. There are so many scenes that we wrote of this underworld that didn’t play. But at a certain point, you realize, if a coin comes out, you’re dealing with an economy on a completely different level.

RAY MORTON

Then you go back to those characters. The first film had a number of delightfully offbeat characters, most notably Winston, Charon, Ms. Perkins, and the Doctor. *Chapter 2* adds lots more, including the Bowery King and his derelict assistant Earl, Ares, Julius, Gianna, the Sommelier, the tailor, the coin maker, and so on. Wick’s strange world is full of strange, eccentric people, all of them intriguing.

DEREK KOLSTAD

I can only go so deep with casting in my head, because I grew up with so many people that are long dead. To me, the Sommelier is Peter Sellers. I wanted that kind of role—we got it, and then some. Then when you look at Franco Nero, the original Django, he's a delight! I don't know whose idea that was, but one of the first things Chad did in the second and third one was that he went location scouting and would stand at the doorstep of the building he was going to shoot at, turn around, and walk across the street just to see what else was over there. Doing that, he found some cool shit! He got to know the city very, very well. And the same goes for these actors and what they brought to the table. The experiences and friendship they had with Chad and Dave and Keanu allowed them to bring in that energy and that chemistry.

BASIL IWANYK

When Derek Kolstad gave us the script, the first draft, and it said, *John Wick: Chapter 2,* that's when we realized, "Okay, these are chapters. This is not a sequel, these are chapters," which is something we followed through on in *John Wick: Chapter 3.* If you look at the three movies, they all take place over about a month. Maybe less. We just thought there was something really cool about having these three movies in such a condensed time period. And as soon as we saw the chapter idea, it meant they were different chapters in the larger story of John Wick. Which made us end the movie the way we did. By the time we were maybe halfway through shooting *John Wick 2,* the identification of the original movie in the zeitgeist was exponentially more robust than it was three, four months before we started shooting. We had guys like Common saying, "I want to be in a *John Wick* movie. Find me a role." It really went into the consciousness of not just showbiz but the audience. So, we were feeling pretty good about ourselves by *John Wick 2.* Like, "Well, this is a differently valued IP than it was before we started."

DEREK KOLSTAD

The creation of the Bowery King was from Chad and I. Before we started production, Chad really wanted a homeless man in the back of every scene, but then we realized we don't have a hundred million dollars. I think everyone here loves *North by Northwest,* and my favorite line in that whole

movie is, “He’s a man that deals in secrets.” Or *Poltergeist*—you move the tombstones, you move the bodies. What we wanted to do with a lot of our characters was, you don’t have to explain what he does, you just see it. When he takes off his homeless ghillie suit, and he’s got a smoking jacket on. I just love that. That was just Chad and I giggling over Japanese whiskey. And when *2* happened, it was a bigger budget, but not massively so. And that one was the hardest of the three, because it’s like, “What are we doing?” And yet at the same time, you look at what it’s become so swiftly, and it’s pretty impressive. And the impressive is on Chad and Dave; I’m just the guy typing away in the background.

Chad watches a shit ton of documentaries. In one of them, the Mexican cartel had trained pigeons, so that element was all real. Except those were SIM cards, because you can get all the data on the SIM cards. That was from day one. I hadn’t met Laurence Fishburne yet. They had wanted for the longest time to give him the Bowery King part. And Basil walks in and gives him a big bear hug. Keanu walks in, gives him a big bear hug. And there’s Laurence Fishburne, and I’m like, “Oh, Mr. Fishburne,” shake his hand, “I’m the writer.” And he grabs my hand, clasps my shoulder, and brings me in for a hug, and goes, “Oh, I know who you are.” All right, this is a great place to be, man.

KEANU REEVES

Laurence Fishburne and I are friends. We became friends after the *Matrix* trilogy; actually started to be friends during it. We felt like they were going to change the world. So a couple of times a year, we get together and catch up on our lives and hang out for a bit. On one of those visits, I said to him, “How did you like *John Wick*? Did you see *John Wick*?” “Yes.” “How’d you like it?” “I liked it.” And I was like, “You want to maybe be in *Chapter 2*?” Being the true professional he is, he said, “Send me the script.”

LAURENCE FISHBURNE
(actor, “The Bowery King”)

He came up to the house and was training for *Chapter 2*. I said, “Dude, *John Wick*. It was sick! Put me down!”

KEANU REEVES

I was like, “Cool. I’ll talk to Chad.”

CHAD STAHELSKI

And Chad jumped on it. Chad wasted no time getting back to Mr. Fishburne.

KEANU REEVES

Chad took about thirty seconds to send an email to Laurence.

CHAD STAHELSKI

We actually had written the part for the first film, Keanu, myself, and Derek. We all sat down and came up with the character of the Bowery King, and Laurence was the guy in mind; we just never thought we’d get him. When Keanu told me he was interested, we’re just like, “Oh my God, are you kidding?” Literally sent him the pages the same day, and I think we got a response the same day.

DEREK KOLSTAD

My favorite thing about the entire production is Ian McShane and Keanu became really close friends. Ian being the actor he’s been for so long, they’ve got this favorite uncle/favorite nephew type of relationship. Same thing on-screen. I grew up being a big *Bond* fan, but who wasn’t? Bond you loved. The girls and the bad guys are great, but you always looked forward to Q, you always looked forward to M, and when Felix Leiter shows up, it hinted at a larger world. So that stuff only worked within a larger world that was forever being revisited and rebuilt. You watch those Q scenes, and, really, for as much as there is animosity between them—especially in the Roger Moore ones—there is also Bond loves Q and Q loves Bond. There is this favorite uncle/favorite nephew type thing going on there, too.

★ ★ ★

In addition to the ever-expanding ensemble, the scope of the story was extended beyond New York all the way to Rome, demonstrating that the

influence of the Continental was felt far beyond a single hotel in downtown Manhattan.

DEREK KOLSTAD

That's what I love about it. I love James Bond, but he's a terrible spy, because everyone knows who he is. I was a huge fan of *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* when I was a little kid; I collected all the paperbacks with their yellowing pages. I just loved them, because they didn't go too deep into what U.N.C.L.E. was. And in the best *Bond* movies, you don't go too deep into SPECTRE. Like, yeah, it's the bad version of MI6. Cool! I get that. And that's what the High Table is. I honestly believe it's okay to start a movie off thinking it'll be a franchise. This is Hollywood, it's a business, and you want that. But you also want a movie that's in and of itself a stand-alone. If there's only one *John Wick* and it ended that way, I'd be proud, happy. Cool. And with the second one, you can end with a bit of a cliffhanger, right? And the allusions to the High Table and the larger world. But if at any point you have to sit down at a table and look at the audience and say, "Okay, in 1643, the High Table…" Who gives a shit? That's not the kind of movie you're trying to watch. So it's finding that balance of being a fulcrum, but not showing too much. Always not enough. That's why as a little kid, we all loved Boba Fett. He's on-screen for twenty seconds here, a minute and a half there, but he's badass. And I think when you look at these worlds, you get it. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, High Table, cool. Let's go on to that guy getting folded in half by a horse."

BASIL IWANYK

We didn't know that the audience wanted a bigger world, but we gave it to them. I'm a huge James Bond fan. You look at *Goldfinger* and then you look at *Moonraker,* and you're like, "Oh my Lord!" Look at the *Fast & Furious.* The first *Fast & Furious* was a coming-of-age drag race movie and now it's submarines coming out of the Arctic Circle. By the way, it seems to work for them, so I'm not criticizing. I think we were playing with a house of money at that point, and we were like, "Fuck it, let's go for it. Let's expand the world, let's make it crazy, let's go to Italy, let's have an Italian Continental. Let's have bigger roles for Ian McShane and everything else. Why play it safe now? We're playing with a house of money." And

that move was embraced. It was kind of the validation of, okay this wasn't just a "You killed my dog" movie. People like it for what it is. Not just the novelty of that dog.

DEREK KOLSTAD

We always talked about how, if these guys work outside of banking technical laws, how do they transfer funds? So we had a scene with a jeweler, where you'd walk in and you'd buy a Rolex, and the Rolex was like $40,000, but you had to move $3 million of funds. So he'd bring out this book of stamps. Do you remember from the classic movie, the upside-down airplane stamp? You know? Which is ungodly expensive. He would fold up four of those and tuck it in the back of your watch, and your watch is worth $3.8 million. And you could just go through customs, "Here's my watch." We loved that. I also loved the tailor. I don't know if you know this, but the tailor in the movie is Keanu's real-life tailor. Originally, when we first did the draft, it was in Chinatown, and they were Chinese tailors. And Keanu read the draft and was like, "No. Only Italians." Because Italians are the best tailors. And we joked, and we did a screen test, and he was like, "Fuck, let's do it," and we used his tailor.

★ ★ ★

With the sequel came a larger budget, but also a larger expectation of the need to one-up themselves with the action, the gunplay, and stunt work.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The sequel budget was about $50 million and the same number of shooting days as the first. But once you go to Italy, and once you look at the sets, and the uptick because it's a franchise, everyone was incredibly happy with where the budget landed.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

With the first film, I went to the editing room and watched. I thought, *Oh, this is great. You guys killed it. It was a great job.* I love the shoot-out

that we did in the club. I thought it was outrageous. The team was there. It was all the 87eleven guys; Joe Joe, John Valera, Danny Hernandez, Jackson Spidell, and myself, Chad, Dave—we were all there for *Wick 1*. *Wick 2* comes around, and Chad asked me, "Hey, will you key this one for me? Will you be the supervising stunt coordinator and help me put all of this together?" I said, "Yeah, I'd be honored." I had other things cooking, but I kicked everything to the curb so I could help my old bro, and I felt like we could do great. Chad asked me the question, "How can we make *2* better than *1*?" I said, "Well, we have to make Keanu better." He said, "Well, how do you plan to do that?"

KEANU REEVES

The action for these films is really fun and demanding. Chad really wants to have longer takes and really bring the audience into the action. For me, it's really fun to do as much as I possibly can. I really feel like it's a responsibility, because Chad has no limit to his imagination. In a way, *I* become the limit. It's only as good as I can get. I appreciate that gift and challenge, and it's what makes it worthwhile.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Someone asked me once, "What are the scenes you worked on the most?" Honestly, it was the scene of Gianna in the bathhouse, and it was the scene with the Sommelier. I don't know guns that well, but 87eleven are consultants and they're all former military. It's crazy the number of times I'm surrounded by six guys and I'm like, "What would be interesting to the gun community?" and them going, "Ooh, you should do *this.*" To be honest, that's where a lot of the fun lies. It isn't pandering, it's just shining a light on a different aspect of life.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

A highlight for me was the introduction of the "short gun." If you play video games like *Doom* and *Halo,* everyone wants to grab a shotgun, right? And then you take enemies out with it. But for me, the introduction of the short gun just gives a new dimension to these kinds of gun battles.

DEREK KOLSTAD

It wasn't a matter of the gun stuff being easy or difficult, it was just a matter of challenging. You even look at *Lethal Weapon* and they really focused on the Beretta [Martin] Riggs was using. Everyone else had a revolver, he had this really cool Beretta thing. And then in *Die Hard 2*, you talk about the Glock for the first time, and they didn't know what they were talking about; they were talking about a ceramic gun and all that kind of stuff. It was unique, yet familiar. And one thing you always want to bring is a new weapon, and yet, the last thing you want to do is in *John Wick 4* he has a laser cannon. It doesn't make any sense. But he has to have something that fits the mold of the character, something cool. So I got shit for the first one, because we had this shotgun at the end that we just thought looked cool, but the gun community at the time was like, "That's a terrible shotgun." It's like, "Sorry, man. I was just going off of looks." And then later, in the third one, he had this thing called a suicide pelt on a shotgun, which means it's your last round on the outside, and if you have to resort to it, you better use it on yourself. Now there are a couple of people going, "*That's* cool." Okay, sweet. So it's finding cool stuff that kind of makes sense within the context, but still having fun. Let's be honest, even in *John Wick 2*, you got a bunch of red shirts sprinting towards John, trying to catch his bullets in their face and heart, and yet, dude, it's John Wick. We're having fun.

J. J. PERRY

I'd been going to all kinds of seminars for shotgun and close-quarters combat (CQC) training with pistols and rifles, going from primary to secondary. I went and audited a bunch of ranges from San Diego all the way up to Santa Barbara. I found a range in Simi Valley that was owned by a fifteen-time world three-gun champion by the name of Taran Butler. We took Keanu to that range, and we had him shooting live rounds three times a week. Now the best way to fake being a badass is just by becoming a badass. When you're shooting real rounds now, you have a new respect for the pistol. You can't make a mistake coming out of the holster or you blow your toes off. You have to understand what that weapon is made for. Every time he'd go, he'd put maybe four or five thousand rounds downrange like four or five hours a session. And it's a lot of fun when you do it; you can't

help but become a badass. You're not faking. Like when you're reloading the gun, you're really reloading the gun. You understand what the gun is doing. If it jams, you correct it immediately. It's not like you have to call a prop guy and say, "Hey, my gun doesn't work. Fix it." Like all the other actors. He *became* John Wick when we started taking him to that range and started training him in higher-level jujitsu.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

For me, a lot of the upping of things, like the martial arts, comes directly from Chad. He was my instructor and the work ethic that he put in as a martial art instructor, and his breaking things down, that mindset, was always there. It's the same mindset now. He just applies it to film, and he's second to none. He can see a bigger picture; it's like a vision. Chad's open to collaboration, but he sets the blueprint. He already has the skeleton and idea in his head. You keep throwing stuff at him till it's like, "*That's* the one I'm thinking of." He's good at teaching us stuff that hopefully comes back out of us and translates to something new for him.

J. J. PERRY

We had three and a half months with Keanu for *John Wick 2*, to prep him. So he was fed a steady diet of judo, jujitsu, sambo, and then I had him working with Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces guys that I served with. And, like I said, I had him going to Taran Butler's range three times a week. This was all part of that regimen as an action guide; this is what we do. We train the actors. I'll give you an example, like in *Warrior,* it was three months of training for Tom Hardy and Joel Edgerton. They had to look like cage fighters. So we trained them, body-shaping them. That's part of the illusion of what we do: again, we go back to the mantra, the best way to fake being a badass is just become a fucking badass. Then train them and surround them with killers. Real dudes that do real shit so it rubs off on them, because steel sharpens steel. Being around that Special Forces guy and that Navy SEAL guy who spent a lot of time overseas doing real stuff, and hearing the stories of what it's like when you actually shoot someone and what happens, as opposed to the old, "You shoot them, and they jump off their feet, and they…" It's not like that. Sometimes they don't die right away. Sometimes the head shot is lower than the brain and they're not dead.

They keep shooting. So you shoot them till they go down. It was feeding him that diet.

DEREK KOLSTAD

The funny thing about it is, it isn't a matter of reinventing the wheel, it's telling the audience, "We fucking love the wheel." That's what the joy is all about. But we also realized in the second and third one and beyond it has to be handled carefully. If you go to a kung fu movie, you want kung fu. And if suddenly you bring in aliens and demons and Gatling guns, you're like, "Okay, that's fine, but I came for the kung fu." In everything we've done, we've tried to remember that. Chad did an awesome job with those horses in *3*, and when you think about the opera, and all of these other action sequences, that was *building* an action scene. It's us geeking around. That's where the joy lies. But these things get harder with each one. They become bigger. At a certain point, you're like, "Well, uh … you gave me my career, I'm happy … bye." At least a little bit.

J. J. PERRY

With changing up the fights, Chad was the one who came up with the idea of getting judo in there. Now the tricky part about MMA is that they fight in the ring without shirts on. They wear tights and gloves. Chad said, "Let's not use wrestling as our base, let's use judo as our base; everyone he's going to fight is going to have a jacket on just like a judogi. So you use the collar and the rest. Have him use six judo throws that he masters in seven or eight jujitsu transitions on the ground. Master those instead of giving him fifty things that he's just okay at." So we gave him a few things to be outrageous at and then shot them in a way that they never looked the same and avoided being redundant. It's like the gun-jitsu that you see in the *John Wick* movies, which was born in 2011 at 87eleven. It was a secret until 2014 when *John Wick 1* hit, because nobody else wanted to do it. Everybody was like, "Ah, I don't know." All of us knew it was a home run, but it was convincing other actors who just didn't want to do it. They're like, "Yeah, I'm not feeling it." It takes a lot of work to be good at jujitsu. You have to practice. It's not like you can just throw a punch and it's fake and you can make it look cool or you can do a knee on somebody. You have to get good at jujitsu. You have to wrestle with people, and you have to

interact in the throwing, putting people on their backs. That's a kinetic impact. So when you actually throw someone, they're smashing on the floor, like when you watch real fighting. This is coming from a guy who's been designing action for a living for the last thirty-one years.

I'm constantly trying not to repeat myself, but when you watch real fighting, you're seeing people really get hit. Now you watch a movie and when they're punching each other in the face, you know for sure they're not really hitting each other. To me, after all these years, it doesn't look like they are. Now, what can you do that's real? You can hit them full blast from the neck down, because the stunt guys will be wearing pads, or you can throw them, which is a very kinetic impact. When we started mixing the judo with the jujitsu in *John Wick 2,* that's when that full style went to the next level. They didn't do quite as much gunplay, because I think the studio is worried about mass shootings for whatever reason. It's not for me to say that. My job isn't to choose. My job is to facilitate as an action guide.

★ ★ ★

Shooting on John Wick: Chapter 2 *began October 26, 2015, almost one year to the day from when the first film was released in theaters. Filming commenced in New York before moving to Rome, then back to Montreal for additional photography. Dan Laustsen joined the crew as the new director of photography.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

Chad saw the trailer for *Crimson Peak* while he was prepping *John Wick 2,* and he liked the look of it. He called me and said, "Would you like to come to New York to have a meeting?" Just to have a chat about the movie. And I said, "Why not?" But I hadn't seen the first one, so I did on the way to New York on the plane. I liked it. Those guys did a good job. But Chad wanted to take it further. He said to me, "I want to do an action movie, but it has to look like an Italian [Bernardo] Bertolucci movie." And for me, it's like, "Fuck yeah, let's go for that." He's very stylish, and he very much knows where he wants to go. He wanted to make a very colorful, very moody, but still very much not a dark-dark movie.

We watched *John Wick* a couple of times; I think those guys did a really nice job. When you do a second one, you have to push everything further. We change equipment, we change the color palette. We were moving everything a bit more towards *Crimson Peak*, making it more colorful and a very deep black. Then moving the camera a lot, because I like to move the camera, and Chad was very much into that as well. Move the camera, but not crazy and *not* a lot of handheld. Keanu Reeves is doing his stunts so well, so there's no reason to cut in or cut away to someone else doing something, because he does all that stuff so amazingly. Chad wanted to play it as wide as we could as long as we could, which is why when you see the fight in the factory, it's so wide shot, though we used two cameras so that we always had the option to cut away. But the plan was to go classic and wide. Instead of having the black/blue background of the first movie, we had steel-blue colors I liked very much, and then we combined that with a red filler light. The inspiration for this contrasting color was coming from Chad, but also because he saw *Crimson Peak*.

★ ★ ★

With John Wick 1 *editor Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir following David Leitch over to* Atomic Blonde*, Evan Schiff, who had worked as an assistant editor for such blockbusters as* Star Trek *(2009) and* Hellboy 2: The Golden Army *(2008), was hired to edit the sequel and remained for* John Wick: Chapter 3 *as well.*

EVAN SCHIFF

I got involved with it because my agency, UTA, reps a lot of the department heads on the *Wick* movies, and they knew they were looking for an editor. I was cutting a little indie-romance about Barack and Michelle Obama's first date at the time, called *Southside with You*, and UTA called and asked if I'd like to go up and meet for *John Wick*, and I was like, "Obviously." But they interviewed me late. I think I did my first interview on their first day of shooting, and I didn't get hired until they'd already shot for ten days, so it was a little weird for me. I hit it off with Chad, then flew to New York and had to catch up with two weeks' worth of dailies. I didn't know Basil or [producer] Erica [Lee] or Chad, and as an editor coming in,

the last thing you want to be is two weeks behind. So I was a little nervous. But they were busy enough shooting, so that took the tension off of me, and I was able to catch up over the course of five or six weeks.

DAN LAUSTSEN

I'm trying to help the director as much as I can, because it's always the director's movie, and as the DP, you have to support the screenplay and the director. Of course we had a lot of discussions on *Chapter 2*, and although it's just Chad's second movie, he has a very clear idea about what he wants to do. The biggest difference was we did a much more colorful movie and classically shot version on the second film.

EVAN SCHIFF

Chad's not a bad editor in his own right. He has a story—I'm going to get the specific details wrong—but the gist of it is that on one of the *Matrix* movies, he had just gotten injured and was not allowed to fly. They couldn't send him home, so he had to stay in Australia for about six weeks. I think it was one of those concussions or something like that. So the Wachowskis invited him into the cutting room. He got to spend a bunch of this time watching them edit the film, and I think this was one of his first experiences of seeing what happens after the cameras stop rolling and you have all this raw material that has to be shaped into something.

DAN LAUSTSEN

It's mood. It's storytelling. We talked about that a lot. We asked, "Do we want to go realistic?" And we go, "Why should we do that?" We put the practical [lights] down, picked up LED, and played around. Should it be blue, green, or red? We went with this green look, and I buy it 100 percent. I see a lot of movies are starting to do that as well, which is fine. It's not about the practical, it just looks great. I love it.

EVAN SCHIFF

I think it's a combination of Chad recognizing that the best people for the job are sometimes the people that are just below the first names you think about. He likes to hire what he calls "the guy behind the guy." He did that with Kevin Kavanaugh, the production designer. I think that comes

from being a second unit director, trying to make his way up to directing, where he knows that there are these talented people back there. And he can get them cheaper if he gets the guy that worked on *The Matrix* rather than the guy that's had decades of editing experience. Chad, despite being a very macho guy and known for his fighting capabilities—both physically and fighting creatively to get what he wants—is also a nerd and a geek at heart. So we were able to connect on other levels that I wouldn't have anticipated based on the public persona. The last thing he lacks is loyalty. One of the first things he asked is, sort of hypothetical, was would I have his back in various situations behind the scenes. And obviously the answer was *yes.* The director is always my number one priority.

★ ★ ★

Schiff was hired, and one of his first assignments was to cut the opening car chase with second unit director Darrin Prescott. Stahelski had sent Prescott into the editing room to get a feel for his new editor, because the director was unavailable to work with him that early on in the shoot. The two spent a Saturday working on it, and when Stahelski came in months later, he commented to Schiff, "That Saturday, I came in to see what you and Darrin had done; that was your test. If you hadn't passed it, we were going to replace you."

EVAN SCHIFF

I think one of the first questions I had for Chad was, the reputation for John Wick was, "This is a guy that kills people." Nobody comes back from the dead in *John Wick* land, but *John Wick 2* opens up with him very clearly "not" killing people. And that was a question I had for Chad. This seems like a departure, this seems out of tone with the rest of the film and what I knew about John Wick. Part of the explanation for that was, because the first movie was a pickup, they made the movie and then Lionsgate bought it, and the second one was a Lionsgate production, I think there were a lot of discussions about what Lionsgate wanted this movie to be. And there was some nervousness about how violent it should be. We had discussions about whether or not John should shoot Gianna after she slits her wrists; that was a big thing that we actually had to take to a preview audience and

test. So Chad sort of pawned off the opening a little bit to the nervousness from the studio side of opening the movie with a killing extravaganza. He sort of retrofitted that concept into “John just wants peace.” All he wants is his car, which the Russians have. Obviously, he’s not going to get peace if he goes in and murders everyone in there to get it. It’s a little gray. There are definitely people that aren’t going to come out of that sequence alive, but there’s more who do.

I feel that my job as an editor, since I’m not tending to have to rescue all that much of the action, is to show it off, which is really easy to do. I’m looking at this as an audience member that does not know the intricacies of the martial arts. “What do I feel is the best angle, the most informative angle, to watch this stunt, to watch this fight from?” That’s generally the lens that I look at it through.

But there were some stunts where I wasn’t entirely sure I was getting the concept of or that it would work the way it was intended to. I was just coming in to finish the scenes that were already shot, and I haven’t had those conversations where I’m on set and everyone’s like, at the end of a fourteen-hour day, “Oh, today was a disaster. We had to abandon three setups.” Those conversations are useful for me to have and to know, because they set my expectations so that when I put these together, it’s not a surprise if there are problems. But not knowing any of that, coming into it blind, the last thing I want to do is go to my new director and say, “Okay, here’s eighty percent of a car chase that works well and twenty percent that doesn’t.” And then have him be like, “What? The whole thing should be fine.” But thankfully, Chad came in, and one of the first things he said was, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, this was fucked. Just cut it out of the movie.” He does not want to put bad action into a movie ever, and he knows instantly the second he shoots it if it’s not working.

★ ★ ★

Just as the Red Circle nightclub sequence from the first John Wick *proved a landmark action set piece,* John Wick: Chapter 2 *sought to give audiences another action-fueled, iconic, location-based set piece in the catacombs of Rome.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

When we were preparing, we didn't watch many movies together, but we did have a lot of still references. When Chad's preparing his movies, he spends a lot of time finding those still references and, of course, I do the same. "What about going there and trying to do … *this*?" Personally, I like half lighting; I'm not afraid of the dark. So you have to show him that, and he likes that very much. Looking at stills is when we were location scouting as well. Like, "Look at this lighting, and look at that location." So it's about location scouting and lighting at the same time.

BASIL IWANYK

Chad's big philosophy about action is so location dependent, and it's exactly right. We do a lot of our action scenes that emanate from locations. Clearly, it has to be shot well and all that, but it's what people don't pay attention to for action when in fact it is huge. And he's right. You see that in the *Wick* movies.

DAN LAUSTSEN

Rome was a challenging location to shoot in. New York is difficult, too, because you cannot just move around—and you need at least two weeks in advance to get approval, which sometimes we didn't have. There's so much stuff you're not allowed to do, and then you'd have people from the neighborhood come out and say, "Why are you so noisy?" It is a little bit like New York. Sometimes you get into problems when the city gets too busy, and the people don't want too much noise or complications. I understand that, because we're not coming in with a small crew. We're coming in with lifts and equipment and all that.

Still, Rome was great. I've shot commercials there, but I'd never shot big features. Shooting in the catacombs was great. It's very rare to shoot there, and I do think I was the most concerned about those scenes. When I walked down there the first time, I was like, "How the fuck do I do this?" The catacombs are really big with another corner, another corner, another corner. When you're going down there, it's pitch-black. You cannot see anything. It's just two-thousand-year-old walls and floor and just black. We had some light coming through the manholes, but that was not doing anything. So I had a couple of heart attacks asking myself, "*How?*" And of

course Chad is like, “You’ll have to figure it out,” and then he just walks away.

★ ★ ★

He points out that in the “old days,” filmmakers would use a lot of smoke, haze, and backlight, but that wouldn’t be appropriate for a John Wick *movie due to the speed at which things move, resulting in lighting not being changed too much beyond close-ups.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

You have to think out of the box; you can’t come down to the catacombs and say, “Oh, let’s put some fluorescents down, let’s put some Kino Flos down.” We have seen that so many times, and we wanted to do something more stylistic. We did a couple of tests of the colors and designs of the practicals, because you don’t want to make them too big, you don’t want to make them too small. Shooting the catacombs is a handful because it’s so dirty, so big, and we had to bury all those cables and such. The practicalities are a huge thing. Chad’s not afraid of anything, and I’m not too afraid, either, so don’t be afraid of the dark, don’t be afraid of changing the colors, and it pays off.

★ ★ ★

With shooting in Rome complete, the production crew returned to Montreal for additional filming, including much of the opening car chase that couldn’t be shot on the actual streets of Manhattan. At that point in the film, John Wick now had a bounty on his head, and the killers from New York City were after him.

DAN LAUSTSEN

I didn’t shoot the part in Montreal, because I think I was doing something with Guillermo del Toro there. But we shot the part in New York and then finished that in Montreal. But all of that is for real: lots of rush-arounds, a lot of real action. It’s real, and you can see that. We wanted to get rain and shooting as much as we could do at nighttime, because it sells the

action as well. It's hard to do stylistic movies during the daytime, because you cannot control the light.

JACKSON SPIDELL

The fight between Keanu and Common, which was partly me and Danny Graham, from start to finish was so much fun. Especially getting hit by one car and then running into another car and flying over *that* car. That was probably one of my favorite gags I've done. I've done more car hits between these three movies than most people do in their stunt career altogether, which is very flattering to me that Chad and Dave trust me to do that. Luckily, I've walked away unscathed, because I've had very good drivers hitting me.

RAY MORTON

The fight sequences are still highly imaginative and marvelously choreographed and filmed, but *Chapter 2* turns the graphic violence down significantly. There is still plenty of killing, but there aren't quite as many head shots and way less splattering of blood and brains. Make no mistake, there's still a lot of both, but nowhere near as much as in *Chapter 1*. This time around, the action is more offbeat and much less cruel and sadistic. There's also more humor. Not slapstick comedy, but more sly cleverness and wit—evidenced nowhere more than in the scenes in which Reeves interacts with Common, every one of which is a delight. All of these things combine to make *Chapter 2* much more palatable than *Chapter 1*.

DEREK KOLSTAD

We had an action sequence that Chad and I wrote, that he kept referring to as the "silencer gunfight." What we wanted to do, and would have if we had tens of millions of dollars more, was shoot it in Grand Central Station, and random people were getting shot, and no one around knew they were getting shot; people are just dropping like flies. But Grand Central Station is fucking expensive, and I think it actually works better this way, because it's a wink and a nod to the genre. The smirk. You kind of know they're like, "What are we doing?" All the way up to the repetition of the pencil and also the "professional courtesy." That line is Chad's.

DAN LAUSTSEN

You just have one train line, and you couldn't move the train schedule too much. The final shot was just when the train was standing still, and we just played around outside on the platform. You *want* to be able to put lights up outside, but you're not allowed to do that. There's so much stuff you're not allowed to do, but again, it makes sense to shoot it on location, because the quality of that location is so great.

RAY MORTON

The filmmaking—which was already pretty sharp in *Chapter 1*—is even sharper in *Chapter 2*. The sequence in which Common chases Wick through the subway is a bravura piece of suspenseful cinema on par with some of the best of Hitchcock's thrillers.

EVAN SCHIFF

I had a little bit of interaction with Chad during that period, but for the most part, they left me alone. They started shooting near Halloween and then had a little bit of a break around the holidays, so by then, I had enough to show Chad and enough to know that I was on the right track.

DEREK KOLSTAD

At this point, the way John looks at the world is, "Fuck your rules. This one thing will follow me till my grave, and I'll deal with it, but fuck all y'all." And we always wanted to maintain that. But what was really cool about that is Cassian understands and doesn't. Winston understands and doesn't. And that's why I've always loved the relationship between Winston and John, because in the original draft, Winston is kind of the devil and smirking and chuckling at, "Oh, you think you can get away?" But once John had gotten away and has been dragged back, there's almost this sympathy of the devil that is taking place.

BASIL IWANYK

Everything's supposed to be meta. Chad and I are movie nerds, we love action. We want to tip those hats, and people dig that. We do it quite a bit on *John Wick 4*, which is exciting. I think the charm of those movies and the charm of making them, even though they are extraordinarily difficult now,

is we all have a laugh. We don't have a laugh because it's fun but because we all know how absurd it is. And in *John Wick 2*, when Keanu and Common are falling down the steps in Italy and they fall and they fall and they fall, you just have to laugh because it's so absurd. And when Keanu gets hit by cars—or that knife fight in *John Wick 3*—I smile just thinking about it. We all know we're making craziness. That's the fun part about it.

★ ★ ★

John Wick: Chapter 2 *concluded principal photography in late 2015, at which point, postproduction began. Unlike the previous film where the production was racing against time and money for completion, this time, there was a little more time to move … and argue.*

EVAN SCHIFF

Wick 2 was one of those movies where we moved entire sequences from the end of the movie to the middle. Chad had a feeling that the end of the movie was not structured properly. He knew that during production. He had mentioned it early on, particularly about the Common fight. "I might want to see a version where you move Common earlier. I'm not sure how it will work, I don't know where it will go, but take Common out of the end and put him in the middle somewhere." So that was always an idea I had in the back of my head as I was doing my assembly. They'd also written into the script all the montages—I personally love putting montages together—and John getting his map and his guns and his suits and everything. Those were all individual scenes with entrances and exits. Those were not written to be cool four-minute montages with awesome music behind them. And for me, as I was watching my own assembly, I was like, "I am bored out of my mind watching this. And if I'm bored, everybody else is going to be bored." That was one of the first things when we got into doing the director's cut. I was like, "Chad, gimme three days on my own." Thankfully, he's a busy guy, so I can go, "Fuck off for three days and come back and see what I've got to present to you," and he's okay doing that. So I spent a while compiling all that stuff. The Gianna arrival is its own little music video intercut with Keanu putting the guns in the catacombs—all that stuff was not really fleshed out in the script.

★ ★ ★

Despite the eventual success of the first film on home video after its theatrical run, there still was a question if the film was a novelty or was laying the groundwork for a genuine franchise. That question continued until the day of the sequel's early test screenings.

EVAN SCHIFF

The interesting thing was, they still didn't expect *John Wick 2* to succeed. A lot of the battles we fought in postproduction—trying to get more money or trying to get reshoots or trying to get the visual effects that we wanted—and a lot of the resistance that we got to granting those requests was because they really didn't understand what they had on their hands in terms of the studio. There was a while where the internal narrative on the studio side seemed to be that we were a "problem movie." Then we get to our first preview screening, and we had to turn away three hundred people. That was their first indication of, "Oh, there's a lot of interest in this movie." Then we scored well, and lots of doors opened up, and money started flowing again. They didn't immediately know they had a hit on their hands with *Chapter 2.*

★ ★ ★

Schiff notes that there had been a fight beat in Chinatown in the film that simply didn't work. They ended up shooting John stabbing antagonists with pencils twice; the first being the failed sequence in Chinatown.

EVAN SCHIFF

We tried it every which way, because Chad didn't want to have to go back and ask for reshoot money for something that he had already shot. But in the end, I was like, "We can cut this a thousand different ways and try to make it choppier, but that kind of goes against your whole ethos, and it's obvious what we're doing and it still won't look good in the end." So that was one of the things, when we did our week of reshoots on *John Wick 2,* that we got again. Between the reshoots that we got in Montreal and moving the Common beat, we ended up assembling what I still feel like is

one of the great chunks of *Wick 2*, which is after John kills Gianna, getting John from Rome back to New York and setting up the call center, and setting up all the assassins, and building up the sumo assassin and the violin assassin, which is Chad's ex-wife, and the pencil to the back of the neck, and then finally you culminate in the Common train fight. So that ended up being a mostly natural place to put Common, and once you finish that Common fight, then you're accelerating to the end of the movie, and you only have to worry about Santino from that point on.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER
(stunts, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

During principal photography, I originally played an assassin in Chinatown. Chad said, "Okay, you're going to come back, and we're going to reshoot your scene where you're playing an assassin, but you're going to be dressed differently this time. I'm going to give you a violin and have you playing music." I had a week where there was a little bit of rehearsal and prep, and then we would shoot it, and he basically said, "I need you to take violin lessons." "What are you talking about? I don't play the violin." But we got this violin teacher, and he came over to my apartment for a couple of different lessons. I can kind of play the guitar in that I've picked it up a few times and I've learned a couple of things. But a violin is a very particular instrument. This poor guy by the end was like, "All I want to do is try to make you look like somebody who might hold the violin," and for him, it was one of the hardest things ever. I think Chad thought it was going to be hilarious, that I'm going to have to use a violin and look stupid. Thanks, Chad!

DEREK KOLSTAD

One of the things I loved about Chad is he has a massive respect for his DP, his writer, and his editor. The joke was the greatest praise you could get from him is, "I don't hate that." But the reality is, when we got to the end of the shoot, I got a call from him saying, "Derek, I fucking love it." He fought for this, and this is his movie.

EVAN SCHIFF

Chad is a fan of the idea—he hasn't done it—that a production crew that makes mistakes that we have to fix editorially should be forced to come into editorial and work with us to fix them. So they understand why they can't just flippantly be, "Oh, they'll fix it in editorial!" Chad wants them to understand that. "No, no, you say that and we do, but it takes days." Or, "This is what we give up." Or, "This is the amount of money it costs to remove a crew member from a shot because you didn't notice he was there." All those things. He wants them to understand the pain that goes in to fixing it.

DEREK KOLSTAD

I'm not a fucking director or an editor. At some point, Evan Schiff brought me in and we watched a longer cut and we talked through it all. You've heard the expression that cutting scenes is like killing your babies. It's not usually quite "kill your babies," but it's usually "render down your babies." I love the pencil scene in *Chapter 2*, but we wrote and shot that two or three different times. It was too long. People would say, "Oh, it's a simple little scene," but when we talked about it, it dragged the film. You get to a point when everyone loves it. "Oh, it's so simple and sweet," but it's like, "Yeah … simple and sweet."

EVAN SCHIFF

One of my favorite moments that never changed from even the assembly was when Common/Keanu first started shooting each other in the street in Rome, and they've got the cars in between them and the glass is shattering and everything. I cut that, and that just works. The rhythm works and it's exciting, and honestly, it didn't change from my first edit. In terms of the train fight, that was originally a little bit longer. There were three or four stops, and I think there ended up only being two. For me, it was one where I finally had inserts and close-ups and things like that that we don't ordinarily have in the other action sequences. So trying to build that tension of, "You guys are in a public spot, you want nothing more than to just start stabbing each other right here and now, but you can't because your code prevents you." I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what's the best way to build this tension of them just staring each other down, slowly approaching each other, and staring each other down again. Once the fight

starts, a lot of that is choreographed so well and so tightly, there's not a lot of places for me to get too creative with that. But then at the end, there's that dead pause, and the doors open and everyone goes fleeing. The people that you sort of forgot were in the back of the car watching this fight happen, suddenly you're reminded of them, and they go fleeing. One of the things we try to do in the *Wick* movies is "fight, fight, fight, joke." That was a joke at the end of that sequence.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Whenever you do a sequel, the scenes that take the longest are always the first scene and the last scene. The first scene we always talked about doing the car fu, and that's fun, because we rewrote that and we reshot that so many times to get the right way in. And the last scene was always about *Shane* and *Three Days of the Condor,* just coming up with a way that if there was no more *John Wick* after this, you're still satisfied. That took forever. And it's funny, because it plays off as simple, but good God, it's a miracle.

* * *

Unlike the first film, which was close-ended with a definitive resolution, the sequel ends on a cliffhanger with John on the run, after having a $10 million bounty placed on his head by the High Table, and, therefore, fair game for any of the seemingly unlimited number of assassins out there seeking to make their mark by killing the legendary John Wick.

DEREK KOLSTAD

To me, that wasn't even the biggest thing, it was that he shoots the dude in the Continental. *That's* where it's like, "Okay! Where do we go with this, Chad?" Yet you accept it. Because in that moment, John's like, "Fuck it all." And yet, Winston still has his play. And what I like about him, too, is Marvel did it so well in the movies and comic books growing up, when you look at the bad guys doing what they did, you realize—like Thanos and Killmonger are good examples—they're kind of not wrong. They're bad—they're not right—but they're not necessarily wrong. So whatever Winston has in play, you always want to guess come the end of all of this, "Was it

always pure? Was it always playful? Was it always cynical? Was it for his own means?" You just want to have those characters. To me, I always loved that Charon and the dog connect. Just the little things like that. Or like in the third one, the guy had a cat. We're not mystical, but it goes back to a cowboy and his horse. Like in *Silverado,* "What are you guys talking about? Can't you see this horse loves me?" I love that stuff.

7 ANATOMY OF A FIGHT SCENE: THE HALL OF MIRRORS

"The knife is in your aorta. You pull it out, you will bleed and you will die. Consider this a professional courtesy."

Another memorably iconic fight sequence from John Wick: Chapter 2 *came from the hall of mirrors fight at the end of the film, making innovative use of a trope that's been around since Charlie Chaplin's* The Circus *(1928), followed by such films as Orson Welles's memorable stand-off with Everett Sloane and Rita Hayworth in* The Lady from Shanghai *(1947), Sean Connery's infamous sci-fi effort* Zardoz *(1974), the James Bond adventure* The Man with the Golden Gun *(1974), Arnold Schwarzenegger's* Conan the Destroyer *(1984), and Jordan Peele's* Us *(2019).*

But few used it as effectively as Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon *(1973)—until, of course,* John Wick: Chapter 2, set *in an art museum exhibit known as* Reflections of the Soul, *a multi-floor experience where the halls, rooms, and stairs are lined with mirrors, which reflect an array of video screens and lights.*

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

That was an expensive set. That was a difficult set. *And* it was a cool fucking set. It was something [Chad] had always wanted to do. And these guys have a special place in their hearts, for good reason, for two movies in

particular, *Enter the Dragon* and *The Lady from Shanghai*. That's where that came from. Chad fought for it, he got it, and he made it come into play.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

A scene like that comes down to our background in action design. Sometimes bigger is better; sometimes being sneaky and being creative adds a lot. Also, if you look back at the movie, we do a lot with reflections and duality and the size of John Wick. So what better to deal with reflections and mirrors? Keanu and I are both fans of *Enter the Dragon,* and we figured we might not get another chance to do an action movie, so we should pay tribute to one of our favorite action films of all time. Between myself; Dan Laustsen, our cinematographer; and our production designer, Kevin Kavanaugh; we sat down and decided, "Okay, how are we going to do this better?" So we added in the video, we added in the colors, we added in the lights, the different kinds of fun house effects that we did, and kind of made it all about being an art exhibit, which we found really fascinating.

And then, for about three months, we had all the rehearsal mirrors that we had up in our rehearsal hall and, between us and the stunt team, just started holding mirrors twenty different ways to see how we could capture the reflections and make it interesting. Rather than just kung fu, we decided we'll do a gunfight in the mirror room. We thought that was really fun. We pretty much used every trick we could to hide Keanu, hide the stunt guys, and what we couldn't hide, we used a little bit of visual effects to help. But it was a lot of fun. Very tricky, but very satisfying. We really liked the way that came out. It wasn't welcomed with open arms in the beginning. It took a lot of people a little while to get on board with what we wanted to do, and no one likes to shoot in a room full of mirrors. But that was a lot of fun.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

My team and I went in there two weeks before filming. Chad was busy filming, so he couldn't go down there, and the sets were built while he was filming. It's a $40 million budget. They don't have money to paint

everything out in postproduction, so we spent two weeks in there shaking out all these infinity shots, like filming the ceiling because the floor was a mirror, too. You don't know what you're looking at. And then you have the subject, which you film into reflection, into reflection, into reflection and let the subject step into the foreground, so you're disorienting the audience. And that was inspired. Before we left for Italy to do the tunnels and the museum scene, we shot the mirrors in New York, but the stages were in New Jersey. Through it all, we had to track all the wounds that happened before—it's multilevel, three-dimensional jujitsu when you shoot out of sequence.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Honestly, that sequence was Chad's. We talked about the ones that had been done the best, like *Enter the Dragon.* We talked about it *all* the time. One of the jokes was that when you see the behind-the-scenes pics from *Enter the Dragon,* it's literally one wall of mirrors that they reshot and edited. *Our* set was custom made. One of the things Chad always wanted to do was that moment when Keanu makes the mistake of shooting at the reflection and instantly shoots through the mirror. That's just fun shit, dude.

DAN LAUSTSEN
(director of photography, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

You look at a scene like that, and we're not using any wires or people flying around like in these Chinese movies. Everything is practical. And they are fighting together, against each other. That's the way to do it. As much as you can do practical, for me, you're selling the action much better, because sometimes you see these action sequences and people are flying around like robots, and you know it's not for real. But I think *John Wick* is so much real action, that's the reason people like it so much. It feels like everybody's there. As we are.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

It's really fun when you have an actor who is actually able to kick you in the neck when he's supposed to. We were getting ready to shoot part of the fight, and I looked at Keanu and was like, "Just go ahead. Kick me in

the neck." He's like, "I don't want to do that," but I said, "I trust you. Just get in there. We do it once well, we won't have to do it again. No matter how much it hurts, we've sold it and we'll move on." So we went in there, and he lays it in just perfectly. He didn't overdo it, and luckily, it looked great, and we moved on. It was just one of those things where you have an actor who's such a good martial artist, he can actually, in the middle of this fight, just kick you square in the neck and *not* murder you. That's amazing.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER
(stunt double, "Ares")

I doubled for Ruby Rose in these scenes, and it was actually quite complicated, because it was *all* mirrors. In order to hide cameras and other things, sometimes you had to paint them out, which was a bit of a challenge. A lot of times we'd have to move the mirrors, just edge them slightly so that we could get our cameras through there. Other than that, as a performer, it was almost like being anywhere else. As a fight, it wasn't any more challenging other than the camerawork than any other place, but it was really cool. I mean, all the screens and floating fire and video and whatnot. It was really cool to be inside the set and see the production value in design and to come up with really different and cool ways to create a fight scene within this little maze of mirrors. It was pretty epic, actually.

DAN LAUSTSEN

We painted the operators out of the mirrors, but we didn't paint more than a few lights out, because most of the stuff was top-lit, and we had those boxes that you could move around, and that was kind of practical. We designed them to be practicals, but that was actually the key light, so you could have them in the shot. Of course, sometimes you cannot avoid the camera, because you have something like five or six times the reflections. At the beginning, we tried to get rid of that, but you're always running out of time, so we said, "Let's shoot as much as we can and paint the operators out."

And that's great when you can do that. But you couldn't do that in the old days. When you see *Lady from Shanghai* or whatever, that's done for real. We looked at those movies a lot and tried to figure out how to do it, and we could see that the lighting was not so complicated. We had to have a

plan of making practicals that would be powerful enough to give the key light, but still look right, and then paint the operators out. That was the approach. And make the color palette, because we had these boxes where the LED light was going in the back wall. It looks pretty good when you can change the colors and it feels like you're in a new place. That set was not so big, but we just cheated a lot there.

EVAN SCHIFF
(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

In general, we temped in all the gun muzzle flashes and the blood. Some of the stuff, obviously, we can't temp. We'll get storyboards and post-viz for something like the house explosion. We actually previewed the storyboards once, which is a little bit of a terrifying experience when you realize that audiences will kind of go with whatever you show them, even if it's storyboards. One of the things we didn't have and we couldn't temp was all the reflecting windows in the *Reflections of the Soul* exhibit. We warned the audience that there's a moment where the mirror doors close and you just see a camera front and center. And the audience starts giggling, going, "Oh, look at the cameraman with the New York Yankees hat on!" We temp the things we can and that are necessary for telling the story. Things like the train windows; that would be too complicated for us to do in editorial, so those just live as a stationary train until we get to that point.

Chad gave me a heads-up early on that instead of having a closed set with mirrors and reflections where you don't know what's what, everything was going to be open and all glass. "But there's still going to be reflections?" "Yeah, but Dan and I are going to figure that all out." And they did actually figure out how to light; they had the lighting down to such a degree that they knew in advance where they needed to put the lights in order to have a reflection or to not have a reflection. So even though that set was wide open, you actually couldn't see where there was a glass wall and were there was not. And if you weren't paying attention, you could walk right into a wall.

For me, it reminded me a bit of *The Man with the Golden Gun*, although there's no wax statues or turntables. But there's a lot of that kind of thing where something turns and suddenly your perspective shifts. I'm not really thinking about the references as I'm cutting; I have to make sure

what we're trying to do works before we try and reference somebody else. The mirror room was shot in little vignettes. There were just little moments, and together, they added up to a sequence. We took some out in interest of time and speed and things like that. There was a lot more of a cat-and-mouse game than in the glass office in *Wick 3*.

★ ★ ★

John Wick: Chapter 2 *was released in theaters on February 10, 2017, and would go on to earn $171.5 million worldwide, nearly double the take of the first film. And as with that effort, the home video sales were equally stratospheric, with estimated earnings of $48 million (*The Fate of the Furious*, which came out the same year, earned over $1.2 billion at the box office, yet only $46.8 million in home video sales—a million less than* John Wick: Chapter 2*).*

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

The movie looks great, even better than *Chapter 1*. The production design folks continue to choose classical locations and present them in highly stylized ways that make them all look mythic. This time around, they don't limit themselves to just New York City, but expand to the wider world. All of this reinforces the notion that the *Wick* saga is taking place in its own unique world. The cinematography is also much better; the tinting has been toned down, resulting in richer colors and sharper lighting. The end of the film is just great: the ever-relentless Wick ignores the prime rule of the Continental and kills D'Antonio and as a result is cast out of the criminal community and forced to go on the run. This is a terrific turn and sets us up for an even more intriguing adventure to come.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4)*

John Wick 2 was on TV recently, and I watched ten minutes of it. It was this scene with John Wick and the Italian guy in front of the old artwork, where the Italian guy is saying, "You have to go kill my sister." And I'm going, "Wow, it actually makes sense!" And it was interesting that my

reaction was that, because I was constantly wondering, “Have we figured our shit out?”

Now, it got better on *Chapter 3*, and we’re in a much better place on *4*. On *2*, it was much more mayhem. On *1*, we had the script locked very early on, but on *2*, there was a lot of self-doubt. A lot of questions of: Why was the first one successful? What are we doing here? Can we replicate it? Do we *want* to replicate it? How different can we go? We had no idea, no road map, and it was a struggle to find our level. But a lot of those were kind of cosmic philosophical questions that we couldn’t answer.

8 DOG DAYS: JOHN WICK, CHAPTER 3—PARABELLUM

"How good to see you again so soon, Mr. Wick."

Given the box office success—not to mention the cliffhanger ending—of John Wick: Chapter 2*, it's hardly surprising that there would immediately be a third movie green-lit in the ever-expanding saga. What might be surprising, however, is that work had already begun on the third chapter before the first sequel was even released.*

Among the returning veterans of previous installments for Chapter 3 *were director Chad Stahelski, editor Evan Schiff, screenwriter Derek Kolstad (albeit in a diminished capacity), and, of course, Keanu Reeves as the titular John Wick.*

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

There is this awesome movie from Korea called *The Man from Nowhere*, and it had elements I wanted to capture. Early on, for the third one, I wanted John to be excommunicado, broke, begging in Tokyo or some corner of the earth that's sexy and cool, and he stumbles upon something that has nothing to do with his journey, and he does the right thing. I love the idea that in both movies John is actually doing stuff for other people, and I wanted him to do something for him. I wanted to have a pure innocent in this franchise that propels you forward.

EVAN SCHIFF
(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

We knew as soon as the second movie came out that there would be a third; they green-lit *John Wick 3* on the Monday after the film premiered. I knew that my working relationship with Chad was good and everybody trusted me, but there were some touch-and-go moments during post, when there were arguments about scenes that ended up being cut out of the movie that Chad was fighting to keep in. Some points they were like, "Maybe we need a different editor?" And I'm like, "No, you don't need a different editor to cut the scene, we just need to agree whether the scene should be in or out. Anybody can push the buttons, but all of you above my pay grade have to agree to what you want in and what you want out."

DEREK KOLSTAD

The biggest obstacles were you don't go too big and you don't go too small. *Die Hard with a Vengeance* is an interesting one, because when it first came out, I didn't like it all that much. But as time went on, it became one of my favorite movies, because you weren't expecting what that movie is. Then there's *Miller's Crossing.* To come from a guy loving the Coen brothers and films like *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona,* when you looked at *Miller's Crossing,* at first, I was like, "What is this thing?" It eventually became my favorite. And the same thing happened with *The Big Lebowski.* That is not the movie I was expecting. And then, over time, you love it. When you look at *Chapter 3,* we knew we were going to be more international. We knew that Chad, especially, really wanted to shoot in Jordan or Dubai or one of those places and that he especially wanted to do all of the stuff with the dogs. There's only so much I can write in a screenplay, and you also have to hand off the idea of, "Okay, it's a spice market with dogs that murder people." Cool. But the foundry, where they make the coins? That was in the opening credits for the second one, but it never got shot.

★ ★ ★

Despite the fact that it had only been seven years since Kolstad wrote the spec script Scorn, *by the time that* John Wick: Chapter 3 *arrived in the theaters, the franchise had grown considerably from its modest beginnings. To further the ever more elaborate story, the producers brought in a number*

of writers, including Kolstad, to work on it. The final draft was a script based on a story by Derek Kolstad and a screenplay credited to Kolstad, Chris Collins, Marc Abrams, and Shay Hatten.

DEREK KOLSTAD

Oftentimes, it's best idea wins, and then you hand it off. It's such a Hollywood thing that happens all the time where one writer or a writing team does seventy drafts, and then they want to do one more draft and there are nine notes, but then they say, "Let's go to that other guy who's like a million dollars a week." And you're like, "What?!?" It just happens. You just have to give the thing your blessing and are like, "Cool. Let me know what you need."

I think in any industry, especially any movie, at a certain point, it isn't a matter of it becoming bigger than you, you just have to respect the process without truly understanding where the hell you fit into it. I'm a baby writer, man. I was on a Zoom yesterday with Chris Morgan of *Fast & Furious,* and he'd say, "You know what it's like on set." Not really! On *John Wick* and *John Wick 2,* I was on set a bit, but come *John Wick 3,* it's a machine flipping pages. But I understand it. It's one of those things where if you get enough of these things made, you move into a producer's role. I would argue that it isn't the money, it isn't the control, it's just being in the room. You're not one of the cool kids, but you just happen to be in the room when someone happens to say something off the cuff that's cool. "We could do this." "Better idea, we could do that." That's good. There's no ego at that point. Again, best idea wins.

RAY MORTON
(senior writer, *Script* magazine)

Like the previous film, this movie starts exactly where the last one left off, which means that the entire series is telling one long story. It's amusing to think that everything that happens in the three films is meant to take place in just a few days after Mrs. Wick's funeral. That's some jam-packed week John is having. The action scenes are still great, especially the opening sequence in which Wick has to outrun dozens of assassins after Winston has declared him to be excommunicado, a steady stream of fights and action that culminates with Wick galloping through Manhattan on

horseback. The invention, choreography, filming, and editing of the action are as skilled and exciting as ever.

★ ★ ★

The story for John Wick: Chapter 3 *picks up almost immediately after* John Wick: Chapter 2 *ended, with Wick on the run from the myriad of assassins who have been tasked with killing him. In an attempt to escape New York alive, Wick seeks asylum/aid from the Director (Anjelica Huston), who once raised/trained Wick. With her reluctant help, Wick travels to Casablanca in hopes of meeting the Elder (Saïd Taghmaoui)—the head of the High Table—who is the only one who can exonerate him from his crimes against the syndicate. With the help of Sofia (Halle Berry) and some well-trained attack dogs, Wick finds the Elder, who tells him what he must do to earn his life back. Meanwhile, back in New York, the High Table has secured the services of Zero (Mark Dacascos) to kill Wick and anyone who has aided him. Having returned from Casablanca, Wick makes a deal with Winston, who is being ousted from power at the Continental by the Adjudicator (Asia Kate Dillon) for helping Wick, to keep his control of the hotel. In a* Rio Bravo*–like coda, a phalanx of heavily armed soldiers descends on the hotel, and an epic showdown ensues in the lobby of the Continental between the minions of the High Table and Wick, Winston, and Charon. The battle won, the High Table agrees to negotiate terms—with Winston betraying Wick and shooting him. Wick plummets multiple stories from the roof of the Continental, presumably to his death, only to be rescued by the Bowery King, who insinuates that the only way to beat the system is to overthrow it.*

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

If you like somebody personally, either as an actor or as a director, it's amazing what you can do. And we like Ian McShane so much as a person, and Winston is such a cool character. He has a lot to do in *4.* It was kind of an extended cameo in *John Wick 1*, *John Wick 2* was like, "Okay, here's more," but with *John Wick 3,* we really wanted to build out the father-son relationship with John, which was important to us. We started to realize that

we can’t just keep going to the well of Helen, his wife. He needed some present-day relationship to invest in to have some kind of stakes.

It’s hard, because when it’s a guy who is not afraid to die and nihilistic, who do you care about? It just seemed so natural that it’s Winston; they have such chemistry as men and performers. That was the most exciting part of *John Wick 3* for me, all the Ian stuff. And showing off his dryness and humor and then doing what he did at the end. People ask, “Well, what does that mean?” We don’t know. We did it and kept it just enough to where we could slide it in different ways, and we answer that in *John Wick 4*.

DAN LAUSTSEN
(director of photography, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

It’s a ballet. You can see that very easily in *Chapter 3*. Chad is so amazing to design all the action, along with Keanu, so it is really a ballet. The knife fight sequences are so much a ballet. It’s action, of course, but it’s very, very stylishly done.

RAY MORTON

The world of the saga continues to expand in unexpected and imaginative ways. We now learn there is a branch of the Continental in Casablanca, we get to see Wick wander through the desert in his trademark suit and be rescued by camels, and we learn that the head of the entire world’s vast criminal underground is an Arab sheikh who lives in a tent in the desert and who keeps a John Wick costume in readiness in his HQ. At this point, things are so off-the-chart weird that it’s hard to remember that this all began just a few days earlier in a house in suburban New Jersey. It’s only the film’s straight-faced approach that keeps the entire thing on the rails and not spinning off into absurdity. Which by now is all part of the fun. The film finally fills us in on John’s background—we learn that he was once a Belarusian immigrant named Jardani Jovonovich. His desire to live so he can keep the love he shared with his wife alive by remembering it gives the character a wonderfully romantic and poetic dimension. One of the most amusing things about the conception of the Wick character is that this guy who is capable of killing dozens of people at a time would be capable of true, romantic love. In real life, such a guy would be a stone-cold sociopath.

★ ★ ★

Filming on John Wick: Chapter 3 *began May 5, 2018, in New York and Montreal, and eventually traveled to Morocco and back to New York. The schedule for principal photography on the film was considerably longer than previous installments at nearly six months.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

When we talked about *Chapter 3*, we wanted to go even further. Chad and I talked about what we could do, and we said, "Let's shoot everything nighttime. And let's shoot as much as we can in the rain." There were daytime shoots in Morocco, but everything in New York I think is night; maybe there's a few small sequences in daytime. The power of the dark night is so great, and then you can play with the contrast and the colors as well. But number three, again, is very stylistically shot and keeping the action as wide as we can.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO
(fight coordinator, *John Wick* and *John Wick: Chapter 2;* stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 3*)

When we did *3*, it was like, "How do we make this better?" Because I don't think Chad was super satisfied with the mirror room in *2*, and with *3*, he said, "I'm going to make a whole floor of mirrors on glass." Everyone's like, "No, you can't, it's hard to film in glass environments." So he just made it bigger. We went in there going, "Okay, that might be the last one," so we just went for broke on every sequence. Every sequence in there could probably be a highlight for their own movie. You see him fight underwater, you see him ride horses, you see him fight a roomful of guys that are in a knife store. Motorcycles. We just tried to put everything we could in that movie.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

One of the first movies that really inspired me to learn how to trick on my own and flip and stuff was *Only the Strong.* I've been a fan of Mark Dacascos for a very, very long time. Then meeting him and seeing how

much of a wonderful person he is in general, just so incredibly talented still and such an amazing martial artist. Doing those fights with him was a weird full-circle deal in my life, but also was just a lot of fun, and going back-and-forth between him and Keanu was honestly an honor for me.

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

I knew Mark Dacascos way back in the early nineties when I was just a stunt performer. We had met on a movie called *Drive*, which is something he had done a long time ago. When Keanu and I were talking about the creation of the character Zero, we actually had in mind Hiroyuki Sanada, who Keanu and I worked with on *47 Ronin*. I'm a big fan. He's a very serious master ninja, but he had a problem in that he had injured himself just training off on his own. He had a surgery, and he wasn't going to heal in time. We were hoping for the best, but it just wasn't going to happen. So regrettably, Hiroyuki had to take more time off to recover. Mark had asked to be in the movie and was just going to be part of our stunt team, and I went to him and asked, "How would you like to be more?"

MARK DACASCOS
(actor, "Zero," *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I was in New York studying Shakespeare and voice with Patsy Rodenburg, and I get this very cool message from my reps stating that Mr. Chad Stahelski, director of *Wick 1* and *2*, who is now prepping for number *3*, would like to meet me in the morning. And I was like, "This is serendipitous," so I was excited. I didn't want to get too excited, because I didn't really know but was hoping it was for something in *Wick 3*. It could've been something for the future. So I met with Chad and his people, and it was really cool, because he reminded me that we'd met a long time ago on the set of *Drive*. Unfortunately, there were a lot of people on that, lots of fighting; I got the crap beat out of me, so my marbles were probably jarred, so I didn't remember that particular moment. But if he says it happened, it happened.

Chad brought me into his office, and I met some of his stunt guys there. He said, "Listen, I've cast all the acting parts, but I have a fight scene that

I'm thinking you could do." At first, I was completely honored. I did tell him that my wife was a huge fan of the *Wick* movies, as was I. But then I told him that I was in New York working on Shakespeare and that as much as I love action, I try to live by my words—that the movies I watch and how I feel is that there needs to be a character and story before the action. And the cool thing with Chad is that he took it all in, and then he says, "Well, what about maybe doing a scene with Keanu and/or Halle in Morocco and then a fight?" So we agreed, and then, months later, we spoke and Chad said, "Our actor who was going to play the lead villain of Zero is no longer doing it, and I'd like to invite you." I said, "Chad, thank you. I will do it." He goes, "Read the script first." "Chad, I don't need to. I'll do it." "Dacascos, read the script first." I said, "Okay, Chad, okay."

★ ★ ★

The script was sent to Dacascos, and soon after, he called Stahelski to say he wanted to do the part, being promised that all involved would collaborate with him to make sure he felt comfortable with the character. That evening, he had to fly from Los Angeles to New York, arrived on a Tuesday, had his head shaved on Wednesday, and by Thursday, he was filming.

MARK DACASCOS

As a result, I was figuring out the character and Zero's heart and his sense of humor and his passions and all that stuff, day by day, scene by scene. The tough part is that at that kind of pace, you don't have time to really explore and try things out. That's very difficult, because I'm just having to go for it. Fortunately, of course, I have Keanu, and he knows his character extremely well, so I can bounce my stuff off of him. I also had the good fortune of having Chad Stahelski, who obviously has a very strong sense of story and the world.

CHAD STAHELSKI

He originally tried to go with what we had written, which is as a very serious Japanese sensei, and anybody that knows Mark knows that Mark is like Zero. He's very happy and energetic. But he started doing takes like

that, very seriously, and we just looked at each other and said, “Let’s be a fanboy,” and the character came out through who Mark really is. And it made us laugh behind the monitor, so we just kept doing it that way.

MARK DACASCOS

He saw Zero a certain way, but was also open-minded and openhearted to let me play on the fly. And for me, it was also very freeing, creative, and moving, because I never had time to say, “In my mind, this is how I’d like to play it, this is who he is.” I had an idea day by day, and then I had to work with what was actually going on. Also, Chad, even in his fight scenes, likes to see what everybody has set up in terms of the structure of the fight. And then he’s famous for saying something looks really good, but, “Let’s change it, give me something else on the fly.” That’s how I felt the fights were and how he was working with Zero in the scenes. We have something, and then we change it. He has me play or say something different and this and that. Like I said, I’m finding the character day by day, and day by day, he’s figuring out who Zero is in this big puzzle of his called *John Wick 3*.

The writers, Chad, and Keanu did a great job in giving Zero a sense of honor. He has passion for what he does, and this was all written in the script. He has a very strong, I guess, respect, admiration, even adoration for John Wick. So on the page, I had all that to work with, but then how much of each thing is where Chad and Keanu allowed me to play. In the script, for example, in the Hotel Continental, Wick and Zero are sitting on the couch together, very close. Keanu and Chad let me play with that to some degree where Zero says, “I’m a fan.” That was in the script, but where they let me play is just how much of a fan. I just thought it would be interesting that he’s not just a fan but he is a fanboy. I couldn’t make it a caricature, but it would work if we establish that Zero is a lethal force in his own right and that he does have a code of honor. And we show his respect for Wick, but also, in his private moment, when nobody’s watching, he’s actually secure enough to be vulnerable and say to John how much of a fan he is. I thought that would be really interesting for the fans, because, in a way, I felt Zero was like so many fans of the movie, speaking for them. And since we have this one scene that’s sort of our private time, Zero can really just cut loose and say, “All of this aside, dude, you’re great.”

They liked it, and we did that couch scene. Chad did tell Keanu and I, “Before I give you any direction, do whatever you guys want. Let me see what you want to do with it, and I’ll direct you from there.” And that was the perfect time to let inner Zero out. When we had that rehearsal, I thought if I do what I want to do, there’s a possibility that Keanu and Chad will just fire me. I didn’t tell them how close I was going to get to Keanu, but I thought I’d just do it in rehearsal. So when Chad yelled for rehearsal, Keanu walks in and sits down on the couch. Any normal person would give space to somebody else you don’t know. If you’re going to sit on the couch, you sit on the far end. Better still, you sit on the other chair. That would be the obvious choice. That would be the respectful choice. But it’s not Zero’s choice. So Keanu sits down and then comes Zero. I go walking past the first chair, and I could feel Keanu wondering, “What’s he doing?” And then I get to the couch and I keep walking closer and closer and closer. And I could feel John Wick’s energy being like, “WTF?” And I keep moving closer, so now my hip is brushed up against Keanu’s arm, and I felt like the guy’s just going to clock me, but I figured I might as well go for it. I press my body even closer so that now my butt is putting pressure on his shoulder, and then I slide my butt down his arm where my hip is touching his, and I’m so close. I could feel Keanu’s body heat. I thought he was going to do one of two things: either knock me out right here or he’s going to yell, “Cut!” or he’s going to do both. In any case, he did neither. But I did feel him start to laugh and try not to laugh, and figured that was a good sign, because he’s staying in the scene for rehearsal. So now I’m sitting there and because I have the first line, he can’t say anything yet—in the scene, at least. And for Zero, he’s such a fanboy that he’s probably got a little altar set up devoted to John Wick somewhere, and this is his moment where he is feeling the energy of John Wick.

So Keanu stays in the scene, which is amazing, because he didn’t know what I was doing, but he scoots over, which is really funny, and then moves over to the other seat, so I slide to the end of the couch where he was, and I just unload with how I feel. Chad yells cut to the rehearsal, and he gets quiet. I thought, *Oh boy, here it comes,* but then Keanu burst out laughing. He jumps up and drops the F-bomb and says, “That’s too funny. We can’t do that, right?” Chad walks out, and I can’t read his face. I don’t know what he’s going to say, but then he says, “Let’s keep it.” As it turned out, he

wanted to keep everything that we did in rehearsal in the actual scene when we started to shoot. And then he would encourage me to play some of Zero's crazy and just get into it. So it was a collaboration between Keanu, Chad, and myself of figuring out who this new Zero was.

EVAN SCHIFF

John Wick 3 felt smoother, felt like the machine was running better. We knew early on that the movie was going to be big and long in assembly form, but we wouldn't have the same structural issues that we had with *2*. Chad sort of knew that even before we started shooting, he'd go, "Yeah, all that rearranging of stuff—I know that you like to do it and it makes you feel good, but I don't like it. It scares the shit out of me. The script is going to be more solid this time." And I'm like, "Okay, fine. I'll cut whatever you give me." There were a couple of things that didn't work that we cut out of the beginning that no one will ever know. Very early on, we got to the knife fight, which I put together. If I had a demo reel, that fight would have been on it. The stunt coordinators came in and saw that scene before Chad had even seen it, and they both were like, "Yeah, that's going to work great." Even in assembly form, we had clip art knives that were just key-framed in there, but none of the glass. We shot the whole sequence without glass in the cabinets, but sound effects were all there. Those are good little morale boosters—to have an early sequence that works and that you can show the director. In both movies, I cut two sizzle reels during production to keep the crew morale up. On *Wick 3*, there was a New York sizzle reel and a Morocco sizzle reel. *Wick 2*, there was an early sizzle reel and a later sizzle reel, because the balance of shooting was not quite the same.

RAY MORTON

John Wick 3 is by far the best-looking film in the series, especially in the big fight in the lower levels of the Continental, which is decked out with wall-sized screens on which elaborate and colorful abstract shapes play out. The sequence was clearly inspired by a similar sequence in *Skyfall*, although this sequence takes the Bond film's concepts and cranks them up to eleven.

EVAN SCHIFF

I went out to New York about a week before they started shooting. At that point, my second daughter had been born, so I had to move to New York and figure out childcare, and my wife relocated her job to New York for the time we were there. Some of it was just logistics of moving across country for a shoot, which comes with hours and hours of setting up your own life before you can devote time to your job. It's always fun going on location, especially to a place like New York City. I've spent seven months in Budapest, and I liked three of those months. So I flew out a week early, went on some night scouts with Dan, Chad, and Kevin, and had some time to myself. During those scouts, we found the Tarkovsky Theater for the ballet scenes.

DAN LAUSTSEN

We were scouting for that location forever. We wanted to go to an old-fashioned ballet place, a theater. We were snooping a lot for that. And then we decided to go up to a theater in Washington Heights, New York. Chad had shown me a picture from another location, I think it was a location in Japan, so we put those two locations together: "Why don't we bring the view from this Japanese location into that New York theater?" So that's the way we tried to combine a lot of things. But when they're leaving the theater and going up to the Director's room, that's a totally different location. We tried to find a place so it's matching to the theater and bring the same color palette. I was a bit nervous, because the scene was so dark. Keanu Reeves is very dark, and she is very dark. But Chad was like, "No, let's do it like this. Don't be afraid. Just do it." And that's fantastic. That's one of the good things when you're shooting digital, you see what you get.

EVAN SCHIFF

Now I knew how Chad likes shots and knew what to expect footage-wise, which isn't a ton. I worked on *Bullet Train,* and Dave Leitch definitely shoots a little bit more footage than Chad. I'd say one of the differences is I actually went to set a lot more on *Wick 3* than I did on *Wick 2,* which is good for me. There's nothing for me to do on set, but I learn a lot of information that is useful. I'll chat with Chad, and if Chad is busy, I'll chat with the script supervisor or the production sound mixer or someone else. I can get a lot of intel and pick up on what's coming in the next day.

But we did the same thing where we hired a local New York crew to work with me and then had an LA crew when we went to post.

RAY MORTON

The film introduces us to even more unusual and eccentric characters, including Anjelica Huston's Director, Asia Kate Dillon's Adjudicator, and Mark Dacascos's Zero, a vicious, martial-arts-trained assassin out to kill Wick, but who also desperately wants Wick's approval of his skills. The film has more outright humor than the previous entries—often in the killing scenes (Wick killing people by getting a horse to kick them to death is laugh-out-loud funny) and especially in the final fight between Wick and Zero. The humor in *Parabellum* is significantly broader than in the other films, but it's not jarringly inconsistent.

DAN LAUSTSEN

We said, "Let's shoot everything at night," which was the first thing we talked about. "How can we go further, how can we make it bigger?" It was a big deal to get into Grand Central Terminal in New York. They said, "You can shoot here, but you cannot put any lights in." And we said, "We don't want to do that." Then you have to start to design the lighting, you have to close some restaurants down, and you have to put some scaffolding in, because you cannot brace it. You have to be very precise there. In the end, we got permission to put lights in Grand Central Terminal. We put something like three 24Ks in with a steel-blue wand, and then we have that blue in the middle, and we have all the windows we were backlighting from outside. But in the beginning, they said, "You can shoot here, but you're not allowed to change anything." But then the location manager says, "No, this is a big, big deal. I want to shoot here." Because I think there's a big difference between choosing a location and painting it for light. We don't want to do a documentary—we want to make a powerful movie. And we did that as well as we could.

★ ★ ★

The filmmakers very consciously decided that they would not shoot anywhere where they weren't allowed to bring in their own lighting, which,

with the exception of Grand Central Station, remained a hard and fast rule for the creative team with the bridge sequence and the motorcycle chase. Viewers will note fluorescents on the pillars of the bridge, which was something added to the structure by the production, as there was a desire to transform the look of the bridge and provide it with a more striking visual approach. Two other location highlights in New York were the sequences in which John Wick incorporates a horse into one of his gun-fu ballets, before riding off on the steed in an equine French Connection*–like chase sequence, and an extended knife fight in Chinatown.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

The horse fight was something from Chad; he was so much into that. In the beginning, we were scouting to find how we could do a horse chase in New York. *John Wick 3* was not a big-budget movie, we could not do whatever we wanted to do, but in the beginning, we talked about, "Should we shoot in Central Park?" But getting in the big, big lighting and rain into Central Park, we could not afford it. So we decided to go into the subways. That was actually an idea we got from *The French Connection.* Remember that car chase? So we were like, "Oh, let's do *French Connection,* but let's do it with horses." So we tried to do that. But horses and trains and noise—it's not the perfect world. Again, we wanted to find locations where we could find the visuals. And I think the elevated subway trains are so fantastic, but there are so many permissions you have to go through.

JACKSON SPIDELL

On the third one, we were like, "All right, he used guns and guns and guns and apparently a pencil. Let's go the opposite way. Let's go down and not use bullets." So that's when we came up with the idea for the knife fight in the antique shop. We wanted to use the least amount of guns as possible, which is why they're all throwing the knives at each other, and it shows a new skill for John.

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

People take it for granted that you can just throw a knife and it's going to stick in somebody. It's not going to do that. It's actually so hard to put a knife in somebody. When you throw it, it'll bounce right off of him and then lets him pick it up and fucking stab you with it. You don't throw a knife at somebody; you use it to stab. Throwing a knife is silly. So that was a test and proof of that. I thought that was a great execution of that idea.

JACKSON SPIDELL

We had so much fun choreographing that one. We were just like, "Fuck it, everyone has knives." He and Roger Yuan are there. They stand up and the lights turn on, and they see behind the other person a bunch of knives. They look behind themselves, and they're like, "I have knives. Ah." Crack the glass, and it's just kind of like a race to who can get them first. It was really rad.

DAN LAUSTSEN

A lot of the glass was CG, because it's too dangerous to be having the glass fall down. We tried to find locations where we could play big, wide shots. Don't be afraid of the darkness and have the big mixed colors, the blue fluorescents, and a little bit more light in the background, the steel blue from outside. So we tried to design that color palette every time. Every time we came into a location, we said, "What is this color palette here?" So we had all these discussions all the time about which way are we going with these locations? So not everything is going to look the same, and how is that working with the screenplay? And again, doing as much practical as we can. We did maybe a little bit of handheld there, but there's not a lot of handheld in the *John Wick* movies, because we like to be on a crane or a dolly or something like that. The reason it works so well is Keanu Reeves is so great, and he does most of his own stunts, so you don't have to hide anything because he's just going to do it.

J. J. PERRY

We all gave everything we had. Listen, I can't tell you how many weekends I didn't have and how much overtime I didn't get. I just said, "The team needs it." We all just said, "Fuck it. We'll just do it whatever it takes. Train Reeves on the weekends? We'll train him. Let's go to the

location and try to rehearse it on location, and we can just figure this out." Everybody went all in, and it shows, because, with the budget we had, there was no room for mistakes.

★ ★ ★

An early fight sequence in the film occurs in the New York Public Library, pitting Keanu's John Wick against basketball player Boban Marjanović as an assassin named Ernest, who Wick quite literally forces to eat his words—with deadly consequences.

CHAD STAHELSKI

I love the New York City Public Library, and Keanu had come up with the idea that he's got his safe book there. We need to get out of town, and when we scouted the New York Public Library, we found it was very small. Then we thought the best way to do it was to have the biggest stuntperson we could find and have them fight. That would be a great way to open the movie, and we thought back to Jaws against James Bond in *The Spy Who Loved Me* and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with Bruce Lee in *Game of Death,* and we wanted something like that.

But we couldn't find anyone in the stunt world above six foot six, six foot seven, and our producer, Basil Iwanyk, was a huge basketball fan. He had seen Boban when he was on the Clippers and also on commercials, and I thought he was very entertaining and had a great look. So we asked him to fly to New York, and we put him with a stunt team for about two or three weeks and then introduced him to Keanu. Keanu fought a sumo wrestler in the last movie, and in this one, we've got Boban. One of the fun things to choreograph in the film is that we had different physical attributes with the different assassins.

KEANU REEVES
(actor, "John Wick")

Boban is really committed to the training. He's really interested in it, he's an athlete, and he's definitely physical and knows his body. And he has great reactions, great timing, and he had a lot of fun in a really good spirit of going in, saying, "Let's do it." After four hours or five hours of fighting,

I think he was just like, “Wow, okay, this is the real thing.” We were still fighting, and he was like, “Okay, let’s go.” And he didn’t get a stunt double. That was all him.

★ ★ ★

Just as the production of the second film began globe-trotting with its scenes lensed in Italy, John Wick 3 *shot in even more exotic locations like Essaouira with a pivotal sequence taking place in Casablanca—the highlight of the Morocco section being the film’s memorable courtyard battle. Jean-Luc Godard once memorably said all you need to make a movie is “a girl and a gun.” With* John Wick 3*, that can be expanded to also include several dogs.*

DAN LAUSTSEN

Most of the dogs were real. They have those dog centers and have been training for decades in New York and Los Angeles.

BASIL IWANYK

It used to be called Mogador, now called Essaouira, and Mogador was one of the busiest slave ports in all of Africa. It’s this walled city on the water of Morocco. Just incredible. You’d think, *We’re in the desert. It’s Morocco.* Well, it must have rained three-quarters of the time we were there. Not just rain but rain in a way you’ve never seen before. Like fucking tropical Florida kind of rain. Just so much rain! And Morocco’s not known for its drainage. It was physically one of the hardest shoots that any of us ever had.

J. J. PERRY

The dogs were outrageous; they did a great job. I thought the horse thing was crazy cool, too. I think that all those movies are fresh and memorable and unique. It’s a testament to Chad’s hard work and Keanu Reeves’s commitment and hard work, and a crew that will do anything for their director and their star.

DAN LAUSTSEN

I love to shoot in Morocco. It was a little bit difficult because we were chasing crew. We brought the camera guys, but we didn't bring anyone else. The same lighting crew from *John Wick 2* we brought to Morocco. I think Morocco is fantastic, but it's a little bit more difficult to shoot with a smaller crew—everything is a little bit more difficult. But again, I think it's fantastic, and the people are so nice. But you have to find that color palette about the location—and you don't have the same equipment, you're shooting in the middle of nowhere, so you cannot bring some big cranes. So everything was a bit more low-key. I'm used to that from Denmark, because I've done a lot of those kinds of movies in the old days here. Again, a lot of scouting. I think we wanted to shoot in one city, but we could not afford to do a company move in the middle of the shoot, so we had to shoot in the same place. Of course, it's always like, "Ugh, you want to go to that place you could not get," but that's just how it is. So we shot everything in the same city. But again, a lot of pre-lighting and a lot of discussions about what to shoot where. And what to do with the dogs and what to not do with the dogs. It was a little bit more of fly and run compared to New York. But we pulled it out. And the dogs did a fantastic job, but dogs are dogs, and when they're getting tired, they're getting tired. Most of the dog action—I'm sure there's some CG—is for real.

BASIL IWANYK

Essaouira is known for its feral cat population, and we were bringing in dogs. These dogs, at any signs of a cat, would go over a wall. So we had to clear the whole area of cats, which was just really difficult. The environment was just tough. Just getting the dogs in there … everything. It almost broke us.

EVAN SCHIFF

I stayed for the first night of shooting. It started to look like it was going to be lost. They had gotten these pushcart vendors to show up, they had gone to Morocco for the specific reason of having a dry, arid environment, and on night one, it starts pouring. And the pushcart vendors are like, "Uhh, you know what? I don't really care about this." So they're leaving, and production design is falling apart and everyone is in a terrible mood, and I'm just like, "I'm glad I'm going home tomorrow." And that

sort of persisted. Weather was a big problem in the Morocco shoot. You can see some of it in the wide shots that the ground is wet and muddy. That was not really the intention, but you work with the hand that you're dealt.

JACKSON SPIDELL

The training for the dog sequence will probably forever live in my brain. I was actually the fortunate one. I trained with the dogs, because being Keanu's double, I had to be around the dogs for quite some time and moving around them if I was ever doubling him in the scene. Those dogs have to be comfortable with you, but the rest of the fight team were the ones taking the bites and taking the hits and stuff and had to constantly be attacked by these dogs. On the first week, I was like, "Let me go ahead and take some hits." They're like, "Well, you're never going to be in there." I said, "Well, I can't just stand back and let all of my friends be attacked by these dogs and be like, 'Yeah, good job. Anyway, I'm going to be over here.'" In sympathy for them, I wanted to kind of be a part of it as well. It's terrifying. It is quite something.

HALLE BERRY
(actor, "Sofia," *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I loved these dogs; I really did. I spent about five months, three or four days a week, going over training with them and learning them and them learning me, and really getting to understand who they are, how they worked, and how I could best work with them. When it was showtime, I thought it was beautiful. It was a nice change to go into this faraway world and the mystery of this world. It was colorful, and I could smell it through the screen. It's palpable what that looks like.

EVAN SCHIFF

Figuring out the dog stuff was tricky. Because that was one of the sequences where they had to compromise what they'd originally wanted to do. They ended up shooting in a different location than they'd originally scouted, and one of the things that Chad doesn't like to do when shooting an action scene is to shoot in sort of a nondescript, warehouse-like area. Because that's so often done, and it's boring. He likes to have the set be part of the entry of the action. For this Morocco/dog sequence, they didn't have

enough time, so they didn't shoot a lot of reverses—so that was challenging to cut together, because it all started to look the same at some point. It was an issue that he knew we were going to have when we got there and realized what the time and location restraints were. But that didn't make it any easier to know in advance that it was going to be challenging. So we went back and forth a lot on that. One of the notes we got on *Wick 3,* more than on *Wick 2,* was, "Be wary of action fatigue." Chad will go off for hours on his disbelief of the idea of action fatigue. I think there was definitely an element of that we were going through, and we wondered if we crossed that line with the dog stuff. You don't want to present something new and amazing, and by the end, people are like, "Okay, but when are we getting to the next part of this movie?" That was something we were constantly trying to figure out: "Where is that line?" We didn't fly a bunch of dogs to Morocco and train them for this one specific movie to not show them, but we also didn't want to sacrifice the momentum of the movie to show everything. So we spent a lot of time on that.

JACKSON SPIDELL

They trained with the dogs for a very long time, and Halle trained with them for a very long time to where she became like one of their masters. They would listen to her in the scene when she's ordering them around, she's calling their shots, which is really amazing to see. Hours and hours and hours of training.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

The dog sequence for me was the best. That stuck out for me the most, because when we were prepping with the dogs, even our animal trainer was like, "I've never done this before." "That's why we're doing it." Usually, with dog bites and things like that, you get the dog to attack, and then you have to cut at some point, because you've got to get the dog off the guy or whatever. However, we're going to stay in these long shots, and the dogs are just going to do the same amount of fighting as our heroes, and we're going to stay in these long shots with the dogs biting guys. Then Chad goes, "I want them to throw the guys like John throws the guys." What? Well, it worked. So again, that one took a lot of planning.

* * *

*With Halle Berry (*Die Another Day, Monster's Ball, Moonfall*) joining the cast as John Wick's ally/adversary Sofia, the actress mirrored Keanu Reeves's passion for performing his own stunts. She trained extensively for the film to both master the martial arts choreography required of her as well as working with her new canine companions.*

EVAN SCHIFF

Everybody knows that Keanu does his training and knows his martial arts and is a badass, but Halle matched him with ease, and we wanted to make sure we were showing off just how badass Halle was, too.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER
(stunts/trainer, *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I had the amazing pleasure of training Halle. She had a really great stunt double named Anisha Gibbs, but it was filming in New York, so Chad and all the guys were there. Halle was in LA, and we needed her to be ready and prepared and to be as good as Keanu in all these fight scenes. Chad called me and said, "Hey, do you think you'd be willing to do this?" So it was three or four months training her almost every day in the gym. It ended up being six months by the time we actually went to Morocco and filmed the scene.

I flew to New York, got a breakdown of what he wanted, and went back to LA and went to work. So Halle and I were in the trenches for a while together, just her and I training, training, training. She's incredible and so dedicated. Five days a week, blood, sweat, and tears; she was going to the gun range and learning how to fire guns really fast and change the magazine. And she didn't really like guns, so that was a big thing for her. Then she'd come into the gym with me for four hours a day, three to four times a week. One of the hardest-working actresses I've ever met or worked with in my life.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

Halle Berry trained just as long as Keanu. She was taking a beating. And it shows. We had to have her train the dogs, the dogs are listening to her. The dogs are listening to her as much as the handlers, and we had to

just hang out at the area where they were so they just got used to our sounds and our smells. And then Halle would come in to train them, and they would respond to her. Eventually, the dogs almost accepted us in their pack.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER

Halle's stunt double did just two scenes. One was when she runs and slides under a table and the dogs were up at the top. Then the other was when the dog jumped off her back. The tamer dog that we'd done it with wasn't making the jump, so we were using a little more aggressive dog, so I think the coordinators just thought they should put the double in just in case something happened. Otherwise, Halle did pretty much everything.

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

We got the dogs when they were puppies, before they were trained to be attack dogs, so these dogs would train to attack like they're just getting their toy. They don't have the aggression in their head, they just want to attack and, you know, get that bite. I think we had six or eight dogs. For a superlong shot, originally, we said, "Let's say you lead off with the actors and then they think they're fighting together, then they separate." So you go off with one actor, then you have one dog attack. In the same shot, that dog's attacking, then we'll go to Keanu, and he's fighting, then the other dog attacks. I thought we just do a Texas switch with the dogs. What we figured out was when you bring them all together, it almost makes a mob mentality. They get crazier.

★ ★ ★

For the film's spectacular denouement in which John Wick battles Zero in Winston's glass-enclosed office, the filmmakers upped the ante on the previous film's hall of mirrors considerably. The penultimate fight takes place in a literal glass office with mirrors/reflections on every surface. An "impossible task" merely ten years before—but more manageable today in the digital world where reflections can be removed and surfaces added with computer graphics.

JACKSON SPIDELL

It was a brilliant $2.5 million set that was beautiful, and the lighting was amazing. They only had it in the docket for like two and a half, maybe three days to build it.

DAN LAUSTSEN

I think the glass house is super nice. It's a good sequence, it's fun to watch. The knife fight in *Chapter 3* is cool, too, but I think the glass house is probably my favorite.

EVAN SCHIFF

The set with the glass office was in the middle of Long Island, so getting out to it was pretty much a half-a-day ordeal. We did that a couple of times, because you don't want to miss those sets, they're so amazing.

DAN LAUSTSEN

Chad said, "I want to have this glass house." And everybody said, "Are you crazy? How are we going to do that? How is that possible? This is too expensive, it's too difficult," and blah, blah, blah. But Chad said, "I want to have it," and he got it. Then we just had to figure out how to do it. And that was, again, a big, big design thing between the production designer, Chad, and myself. We spent a lot of time figuring out what the look should be on that location. Because all the LED lights were built in, we could just change the colors, and then we had a huge backdrop—the skyline of New York. That was a "Should we do this blue screen? Should we do it for real? Or should we do this with LED back projection?" We decided to go with a big backdrop and translight [an illuminated backdrop used to suggest a skyline on set]. There was a little bit of light for the close-ups and such, but otherwise, all the lights were built into the set. Then we could control it. The light behind us, we could just kill that, so the light was not getting too flat. Very simple, but very powerful. Just switch the light on and off, because everything was built into three stripes of LED lights. We did a 3D model of that, which we could walk into so we could figure out what the lights should be. It was a big, big discussion for weeks and weeks. And it worked out great.

MARK DACASCOS

During the fight between John Wick and Zero in that set, Chad wanted to change some of the choreography. He was mentioning this particular move to Keanu, where he wanted Keanu to do this jump on Zero; jumping on his body and then twist, midair, and both of them go flying. And Keanu was like, “Okay, I’m open to this, but I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” Instead of Chad saying, “Hey, guys, can you show Keanu?” Keanu calls one of the stunt guys over and says, “Can you work with me for a second?” Then Chad walks out in the middle of the set himself, throws a mat down, and tells the stuntman what he’s going to do. And then Chad jumps up in the air, wraps his legs around, does this half-twisting move, and they both go flying. He did it flawlessly, and that was amazing to me. And then Keanu comes over while I’m saying, “What was that?” He talks to Chad, he talks to the stuntman, and he does some prep moves, jumps up, does the half twist, and he and the stuntman both go flying. Truly amazing.

★ ★ ★

The end of John Wick: Chapter 3 *featured an epic battle in the lobby of the Continental—and a fall from the roof for the title character. While most audience members may have assumed the man who fell to earth was a CGI render, in fact, it was a physical stunt, compositing two practical falls.*

JONATHAN EUSEBIO

I don’t think people realize that that was pretty dangerous.

DAN LAUSTSEN

We built a big set, and one of the reasons for that is we couldn’t find a rooftop we liked. We wanted to have it in “magic hour” [the fiery dusk look before the sun descends that is the staple of so many movies]. Which is what we did in the movie; it has to be sunset, so the only way to do that is to build it in a studio. So we did that, and I think it works pretty well. When you’re shooting on a rooftop and the lighting is changing, it’s just a mess. So we built it. And of course, that was kind of a big deal, but I think it works really well.

JACKSON SPIDELL

The first take was supposed to be me going over the edge, landing on the awning, sliding down, going across to the fire escape, and then down to boxes. When we rehearsed it, it went fine. We basically had it from the fire escape, ten feet off the ground and then up, so it was only maybe twenty-five feet falling. It was like we took the top half and just put it on the ground when we were first coming up with it. So we made the second half, rose the fire escape up to the awning, to the ground, and rehearsed that on its own.

On the day, we realized we never tested it with the suit on and the slide down. That platform was made of Lexan, which is a very hard plastic, but it can also get very staticky, which means that science is going to come into play here real quick. So I go and I fall about thirteen feet onto that awning and, at the end of it, hit the awning I'm supposed to slide down. There's, like, a little railing deal about four inches high that I clip my heels on and fall ten feet down onto the fire escape and then clip off that and then go to boxes that are another fifteen feet down, I believe. So between the suit and the Lexan, the hard plastic static electricity or something … Have you ever seen *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* when Chevy Chase lacquers up the saucer and flies down the mountain and it catches on fire, because he's going so fast? That's basically what happened to me.

When I hit the awning, I just flew faster than I ever had. By the time I got my bearings, my feet had passed the ledge. I clipped on my hip, which is where you see me fly like that over, and actually, what happened is I landed in the fire escape, basically pretty much on my head almost. Feet went over and hit the back. Didn't fall. The fire escape was supposed to break away. It didn't break away. So I basically was just stuck there, and I was like, "Oh, please, please don't be broken. Please don't be anything." I could move, and I was like, "Okay. All right, still alive. That's fantastic." Chad just jauntily walks over, and he has this look, because he's a hard-ass, but he also knows when things go wrong and he's just making sure you're okay, so he kind of just looks up, and he's like, "You all right?" I said, "Yeah, didn't get to the boxes, though." "No. No, you didn't." "Well, if you want to go again, let's do it now, because I'm pretty sure I'm not going to be able to move my neck in about thirty minutes." He's like, "All right, what do we need to change?" So we sprayed a little sticky thing on the Lexan, and the next one went technically perfect as it was supposed to go. I

land, clip off with my heels, go halfway onto the fire escape, and down into the boxes. The fire escape still didn't break away, by the way. That was very upsetting. But it had a bunch of high dents on it. So we go and we watch it, and he says, "Just move on. You're not going to get better than the first one." Because the first one was just so messy and it looked like I died.

So then it moved on to the second half, which is me. So I had to come off of the fire escape basically in a very awkward way and make it again, ten feet over, ten feet down to the awning. I did that three times, clipped off that onto the ground, where we had pads. We put green on top of them, and it was totally fine. I had to do some kind of a match, because it kind of sucked. They made it look less than it should have been. It looked too computer, I felt, in the movie. But what they did was they stopped my body halfway through the first landing on the fire escape, and then basically I had to be in that position and throw myself off over onto the awning that's below. So they fused those two shots together in the right way. Anything in between, they kind of fixed with CG legs or something to marry them together. It was five takes in all. It was my very last day in New York. Then we did two months of training with the dogs in LA and flew down to Morocco to do the dog sequence.

The *John Wick* films are definitely passion projects for a stuntperson. You're going to be put through some shit, but it's going to be worth it in the end, and the people you work for definitely appreciate what you're going through to help their vision. They've been through it and are just trying to make something that people watch and go, "Oh my God. That was crazy. That was an actual person. You can tell it wasn't a computer effect or anything like that." So that's something that we care about, and also that's kind of why we got in the business. We're just messed up like that. After that scene, we were like, "So John Wick dies now, right?" They're like, "Well, no. He's going to be carted off and go on from there." "Right, but he's bleeding out, so you take him to a hospital?" "No, he's going to the Bowery King." We're like, "Yeah, all right, it's a movie. Sure. Why not?"

BASIL IWANYK

We actually had to reshoot the ending. We threw him off the roof, but the audience needed—and demanded—more. The audience didn't want to know if it was good or bad, but they just needed a little more. So we reshot

some of the stuff with him and Fish[burne] in the Bowery King's lair. It was a great reshoot, because the audience just loved it.

RIC MEYERS
(author, *Films of Fury: The Kung Fu Movie Book*)

Now all I want Keanu to do is explain to me how Wick could drop ten stories off the Continental with a bullet in his chest, bounce off a fire escape along the way, land face-first on the asphalt, and still live.

★ ★ ★

John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum *was released theatrically on May 17, 2019. While the budget was still comparatively low at just $75 million in comparison to major studio tentpoles, Lionsgate reportedly spent over $40 million on the marketing of the film. Nevertheless, it went on to earn $326.7 million worldwide, irrefutable proof that there was still a lot of life to the* Wick *franchise.*

RAY MORTON

John Wick: Chapter 3 is far too long. Two hours and twenty-three minutes is far too long for a confection such as this. No matter how tasty, no one wants twenty pounds of dessert. John Wick does not seem himself in this movie. The man who in the previous two films has been an expert, relentless, and fearless assassin who is always two steps ahead of everyone else, here seems frequently overwhelmed and out of his depth. His skills don't seem to be as sharp as they once were, and his opponents frequently gain an advantage over him. The Boogeyman has been transformed into a scared man on the run.

It could be because Derek Kolstad, the creator and sole screenwriter of the first two movies, was rewritten by several other screenwriters this time around, but the movie seems to have lost sight of its protagonist. As colorful and entertaining as the supporting characters are, they are given too much attention this time, often relegating Wick to secondary status in too many of the scenes.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the North African sequence, which introduces Halle Berry as Sofia, the manager of the Casablanca

Continental. Sofia is a tough and fearless fighter who is ably aided by her two highly trained and heavily armored pet dogs. It's great to see her (and the dogs) in action, but during the shoot-out in the casbah, almost all of the focus is on her. Wick is given scant attention and even goes completely missing for big chunks of the sequence. Nothing against Halle Berry—who doesn't love Halle Berry?—but we're here to see John Wick kick ass, not Sofia. In fact, the entire Casablanca sequence is pretty pointless; it really exists as a showcase for Berry rather than do anything to advance the plot in any meaningful way. It could have been cut entirely from the film with no significant effect and, as a bonus, would have brought the movie down to a much more manageable length.

There is much more visible CGI in this movie. One of the cool things about the first two movies is that the action scenes seemed to be done for real, which added greatly to their excitement and effectiveness. I have no doubt that CGI was used to enhance these sequences, but apart from some of the blood spurts, it wasn't obvious. In *Parabellum*, it's obvious, which undermines their believability and effectiveness. Finally, there's no ending. The previous film ended on a cliffhanger, but it had concluded its primary narrative first when Wick killed D'Antonio. This time, the primary narrative is not concluded; the film just seems to stop at the story's midpoint. I know there's going to be a *John Wick: Chapter 4*, but that doesn't make up for leaving us hanging on *Chapter 3*. But none of these flaws are fatal. *Parabellum* is still a very entertaining movie. However, I hope *Chapter 4* gets the series back to the leaner, more relentless paradigm of the first two installments.

9 GOING ATOMIC: JOHN WICK *AND BEYOND*

"You know those movies where the picture just starts to slow down … and melt? Then catch fire? Well, that's Berlin."

As John Wick *itself was the product of decades' worth of action movie influences, the* Wick *franchise would serve as an influence on a new generation of action films that have been providing a more visceral experience, in many instances its leads almost as close to the heart of the action as Keanu Reeves has been. Among them, Chris Hemsworth in Amazon's* Extraction, *Daniel Radcliffe in* Guns Akimbo, *Kate Beckinsale in* Jolt, *Maggie Q in* The Protégé, *Karen Gillan in* Gunpowder Milkshake, *and, most memorably, Bob Odenkirk in the Derek Kolstad–scripted* Nobody.

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

People ask me if I've seen *Nobody,* and I'm like, "Yeah, it's called *John Wick.*" I'm not going to lie, it's really cool when there's movies of yours that have become subgenres. *The Town* was one, *Sicario* was another, and *John Wick* has become a huge one. When I saw the trailer for the Martin Campbell movie *The Protégé,* it said, "From the studio that brought you *John Wick.*" Listen, a lot of people have made a lot of money off of the first *John Wick.* And I'll be honest with you, it's pretty amazing to see. I just hope everybody has the absurd humility to look back and say, "Wow, it started on that one with Alfie killing a dog and stealing a car."

★ ★ ★

*However, the best of the batch of the recent faux-*Wick *films has been the Charlize Theron–led* Atomic Blonde*, which came from director David Leitch, who left the* Wick *franchise to helm the 2017 film. The movie was an adaptation of an Oni Press graphic novel,* The Coldest City*, written by Antony Johnston. The comic and subsequent film took their cues from Cold War espionage thrillers from the fifties to the eighties, like the George Smiley series by John le Carré, Harry Palmer in* The Ipcress File*, and the little-known but highly regarded* The Sandbaggers *television series. Of course, the action in the movie was amped up to eleven.*

ANTONY JOHNSTON
(graphic novel writer, *The Coldest City*)

It is impossible to pinpoint a single moment or influence that brought it about. I have been a fan of spy fiction all my life—movies and literature. And indeed comic series and graphic novels. In particular, I have always been a fan of Cold War spy fiction. I'm old enough to have grown up during the Cold War, and I remember watching the fall of the Berlin Wall live on BBC News with my own eyes, and it had a profound effect on me. It was a life-changing moment. It was an earth-changing moment. It changed the whole of the Western world. But from a fiction perspective, I always loved the Cold War and the opportunities it gave to spy fiction.

Some of my favorite fiction was by people like John le Carré, obviously, or in Mackintosh's *Sandbaggers* series, which is one of those series that spy aficionados love and nobody else has ever heard of. But it is an absolute classic that looks like early British *Doctor Who.* Terribly, terribly cheap TV show but incredible scripts and stories. The TV adaptations of some of John le Carré's stuff, such as *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* with Alec Guinness, are superb. That gives across a wonderful Cold War aura. Then you have things like *The Third Man*, which isn't really spies, but it has that same vibe and atmosphere to it. *The Third Man* was, in terms of the feel and the atmosphere of it, absolutely an influence on *The Coldest City.*

★ ★ ★

Not surprisingly, Len Deighton's Harry Palmer books, including Funeral in Berlin, *whose movie adaptation was directed by* Goldfinger*'s Guy Hamilton, also had an impact on the writer as well as in crafting his Cold War espionage tale.*

ANTONY JOHNSTON

Funeral in Berlin not only was an influence on *The Coldest City,* it's indirectly referenced in it. At one point, David Percival, when they're musing how to get Spyglass out of the East, he says, "Maybe we could put him in a hearse." And Lorraine actually says to him, "This isn't the sixties anymore!" So all of those things were influences on the graphic novel. I knew I wanted to write a Cold War spy graphic novel; it was the only objective I had when I set out. Then I got to thinking, *Okay, if I'm going to do that, what sort of atmosphere do I want it to have?* Well, I want it to have that gray, bleak, lots of shades-of-gray style of the Cold War fiction that I love. So where's it going to be set? Well, you've got to set it in Berlin, don't you? Where else?

When I was planning it, it was around the time of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall as well. So I thought, *Well, surely, it has to be set in Berlin.* So my next thought was, *Well, if it's set in Berlin, when's the best time? The most interesting time in that city's history is during the Cold War.* And again, the most interesting thing that happened was the end of the Cold War, essentially. The fall of the wall. All of these things fell into place, but not quickly. I make it sound like it happened in a night—that wasn't the case, I assure you. But over time, I was making notes and thinking about the sort of book I wanted to write, and these ideas fell into place. And I eventually arrived at a place where it felt almost inevitable that it would be in Berlin, at this time, and I couldn't conceive of the book being done in any other way.

★ ★ ★

With a kick-ass female protagonist, Lorraine Broughton, many have labeled Atomic Blonde *as a distaff* John Wick.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

The final piece of the puzzle was making the main character a woman, which was a fairly late development. I had started to plot an outline without that in mind, and it wasn't quite working for me. If you're a writer, you're trying to work something out, and something's just not quite striking, it's not sparking. And then, almost out of the blue, I had the thought of, *Well, hang on, what about a woman?* Because this is a man's world. Most spies of that nature, at that time, were men. MI6 was dominated by men. The whole of the secret service world was dominated by men. What if this was a woman? Pulling the wool over the eyes of all the men and literally getting away with murder. Once I had that idea, I thought there couldn't be anything else. It felt inevitable. And so that's how we got to *The Coldest City* itself.

★ ★ ★

At around the time it went to press, the graphic novel was sent to various producers, production companies, and studios in hopes of selling the film rights. It was actor/producer Charlize Theron and her company, Denver and Delilah, who first saw the potential of this female spy thriller.

CHARLIZE THERON
(actor/producer, *Atomic Blonde*)

I don't think it was like I woke up one day and said, "I'd like to do action movies." I have always wanted to explore it, but I never had the opportunity to. I mean, just for you to understand, I was raised with a mother who loved Chuck Norris movies and Charles Bronson movies, and my dad loved the *Mad Max* films. I was raised on action films. That's the majority of the movies that we watched. Then peppered in with that was a little bit of *Sophie's Choice* and *Kramer vs. Kramer* at super-inappropriate ages, like eight, nine, and ten. But I think it summed up where my career went. I always had an affinity for all of the genres. Unfortunately, thirty years ago, there just wasn't a lot of opportunities for women to do movies like this. The first time that that opportunity showed itself was after I won my Academy Award [for *Monster*] in 2004. And it was really hard making that film, *Æon Flux*, in the sense that there were so many preconceived ideas, and there were all these boxes that everybody wanted to squeeze you

into. There was a character that I think, today, would be celebrated cinematically way more than it was in 2004. But the film didn't play as well as everybody thought, and there was this moment in my career where I realized very clearly that, because that movie didn't really perform, maybe I wasn't going to be given another opportunity. It was, like, women can't make these movies successful. It was harsh.

It wasn't until *Mad Max: Fury Road* came my way—that experience and what happened with that film really changed the trajectory of my career. It made me realize, "Wait a second, there's a lot of possibilities here." You just have to find the right people who are willing to take the risk. I made an active choice to look out for those filmmakers and to look out for that kind of material to try and develop it myself as a producer. That's where I find myself today. I really like playing in all the different genres; I don't think of myself as having a particular affinity for just one. And the good news now is, we've changed the genre for women. There's evidence to show it—you can't hide behind ignorance anymore. Audiences love these films, they love how we are now telling these narratives with women. There's just been a face-lift, and it feels fresh to explore the world of an action film with women fighting. All of that stuff really excites me.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

The Coldest City was published by Oni Press, whom I'd already worked with quite extensively at that point. And at the time, they had a first-look deal with two producers based in LA. They represented Oni's material in Hollywood. When I turned in the script, which was in 2010, the producers read the script for the graphic novel and immediately said, "Oh, actually, we can just take this out on the town, because this reads almost like a screenplay." I tend to write fairly sparse graphic novel scripts. Detailed enough, I write what is called "full-script style," where I do describe every panel to the artist, but I do so in a fairly sparse style. They took the screenplay, and I assume some kind of reader's treatment of it, out to the town and started talking to people.

I didn't hear anything for about a year until I heard that Charlize Theron's people were interested in taking it to her. They thought it would be a good vehicle for her. She was looking for something like that to produce and to star in, and they thought it would be a good match. Cue lots of phone

calls, some of which I was involved with, some of which I was not involved in. The usual Hollywood dance and tango. Then we got to a place where, about three months before the book was published in 2012, Charlize's company optioned it. Which was delightful, obviously. And a complete, unexpected surprise. Then cue absolutely nothing at all happening for quite some time. Which, obviously, is entirely normal. But I was delighted.

CHARLIZE THERON

It was the first time that I developed something from such a small, tiny little kernel. I mean, that was an unpublished graphic novel. We were sent eight pages—it wasn't even finished. And I said yes to those eight pages. I think the reason why I pushed as hard as I did on that film was because—and this is just a sad truth—there's still a part of me as a female actor that always feels like this might be the last opportunity. It's terrible that that's in my psyche. It's also the thing that drives me and put some real fire under my ass to get it right. And I was relentless on that film. I carried a responsibility since I was developing it that I couldn't look back and say, "Well, you know, it was a script that was…" I was in charge of everything, and I didn't want to get it wrong. I wanted to get it right.

★ ★ ★

*With the graphic novel optioned and a major Hollywood star attached, attention turned to securing a writer and director. Theron and her producing team landed on screenwriter Kurt Johnstad (*300, Act of Valor*) as the writer and* John Wick *codirector David Leitch.*

ANTONY JOHNSTON

It then took about a year, or maybe eighteen months, to find the screenwriter, Kurt Johnstad. He had read the graphic novel. He had either approached Oni or the producers, I can't actually remember which one it was—but he approached "us" as an entity and said that he would like to write the screenplay, because he enjoyed the graphic novel and knew that it had been optioned. He only did two major drafts. The first draft was pretty close. It needed the tweaks and what have you, of course. It was a first draft, but again, it was pretty close, to be honest. And then he wrote the

second draft, turned that in maybe a year later, and that's pretty close to what ended up on film. There are some changes, obviously, but it's pretty close to what ended up on film. Which is, as I'm sure you know, unusual.

DAVID LEITCH
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *Deadpool 2, Bullet Train,* and *Atomic Blonde*)

The thing that drew me to the piece is that the script was by a friend of mine, Kurt Johnstad, who I've known for a long time, and he's also an action movie guy. My wife, who was a producer on the movie, actually handed me the script. She had obtained it, and Charlize Theron was already attached. I read it, and I'm like, "Oh, this is interesting. It's kind of a Cold War noir. It's based on a graphic novel. It's kind of stuffy," when I read it, and I thought about the city of Berlin. I've done six movies there. I'm like, "But Berlin is nothing like this. Berlin is like punk rock. Berlin is like graffiti. Berlin is like gray on one side and colorful on the other. How do I make this rock and roll?"

JONATHAN SELA
(director of photography, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

I just saw the book cover, but I didn't really see much of the images. Isn't it all in black and white? I didn't really think it would be a colorful movie when I read it, but as I started to see the characters and the history of Germany, I realized I had so much freedom. And on the flip side, it's very visual and stylized, but when he needs to get across the wall, it becomes really naturalistic and raw. Charlize's character is a hero and powerful and can do anything, but she's also human and can break and be hurt. You do see both sides. And when it goes that way, it's really natural—her eyes are baggy, it's all natural. You really want to create so many different faces for this one character.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR
(editor, *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde*)

Charlize was amazing. She's a lovely human being, and she gave 110 percent in this. So fantastic. And also as a producer going through the whole thing just like Keanu. I think that was very helpful in both instances.

Both with Keanu in *John Wick*, and Charlize here, it was a very healthy and productive interaction.

CHARLIZE THERON

I made *Atomic Blonde* when I was forty years old. There was a sense of, “Time is running out, you’ve got to get it right. This means so much to you, and if you want to stay in this game, you’ve got to get it right.” So I put a lot of pressure on everybody on that movie. I hired David Leitch for the reason that he could handle it. I said to him, “I’m never going to stop. And I’m going to expect you to never stop.” Any kind of mediocrity is going to be the enemy on this film. When I look back at the behind the scenes, the both of us and that whole team—Sam Hargraves, who now has his own career as a director, shot a lot of those action pieces—left it all on the dance floor. We really did.

DAVID LEITCH

They had the movie, but they didn’t have a director, and they were kind of looking for a point of view. My point of view was quite a departure from the original material, and for whatever reason, that was the point of view that Charlize responded to. I think that maybe some of the other pitches were more straight down the pipe, they were making it more like *Tinker Tailor,* you know?

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

Yeah, David’s a pompous prick right now [*laughs*]. David was and is a lovely human being. He’s just a decent human being. I see him as the same person, but I’m sure he has gained weight in this industry. We know he has. He’s proven himself and is doing bigger and bigger movies. But to me, he’s just honest and demanding, but he’s still respectful. Always.

CHARLIZE THERON

You are as good as the people that you get to work with, and I was very lucky that I got to work with really good people in that film. Great people on that film.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

One of the producers is Kelly McCormick, who is David's wife, and even though she's uncredited, she was very important in the first *John Wick*. She was at the time manager for both David and Chad.

DAVID LEITCH

I started to deconstruct what was on the page and tried to make it, as I call it, a punk rock spy thriller. As we started to add music and set piece ideas, it became its own beast. I made an outline, and I pitched it to Charlize and said, "This is the movie I would like to make this into." She was like, "That sounds cool. Let's do that."

JONATHAN SELA

David is a really humble, kind human being. A really great filmmaker. I think he's just getting better and better. The action is the easy part for him, and he's becoming a better storyteller. I think he really knows the audience, which is a big part of filmmakers. Knowing what sells and knowing what the audience likes to see, what makes them smile or laugh—it's a different kind of skill of the job. It's a lot of mutual respect, and we understand each other and what we want to do. There's always a language, and it's an environment where you never feel like you can't ask a question or say, "How can we do better?" It's like a film family.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

Nobody was more surprised than me by just how faithful the film was. Obviously, I understand this process; I've had friends go through this process before me, and I've read the same stories everybody else has of authors who don't recognize their own work on the screen. But obviously, I did, very much. What I always say to people is the style and mood and presentation is very different, but the characters, the story, and even lines of dialogue are taken from the book. It's incredibly faithful to the book, and yes, I'm well aware of how unusual that is and just how lucky I am to be in that position, to where I can say to people, "Actually, that is pretty much the same story as in the book." Honestly, some of the changes made, such as making the French officer a woman rather than a man, I'm fully in favor of. When that suggestion was presented to us, I think that may have been in the very first draft of the script, and I was all for it.

DAVID LEITCH

It's more espionage than action. I was making it a sort of wish-fulfillment retrospective on the eighties. It's aggregating all the cool vibes you could get from the eighties and putting it on film and making it very music video-y. It was just not what the graphic novel is like. And they bought into this interesting vision of it.

★ ★ ★

With its hyperreal MTV aesthetic depicting a supercharged neo-noir eighties Berlin, the film also paid homage to its cinematic antecedents in virtuoso Hitchcockian set pieces, like in the scene in which Lorraine is helping her asset, Spyglass, escape East Berlin, in the midst of a street protest.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

I don't think we sat and said, "We're going to make it *Foreign Correspondent.*" It's just a movie that was given so much heart and soul. When you put your heart and soul into it, it's so much easier to go along with where the movie wants to go. So if it wants to change at this part, we changed it. Go with the emotion. It gets extremely emotional for me at the end when the shit goes down. And the movie changes, but it's also because the walls are breaking down. Both the walls outside, but also their inner walls.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

The main difference being the presentation and the visual style—and that, as I understand it, was Dave Leitch's spark of genius—was, "How can we make a noir for the modern age?" Because the book, as you know, is very stark. Very black and white. Deliberately so, to get across that kind of Cold War feel. But you can't put that on-screen. People have tried, and let's be honest, it doesn't work. You need something more. In addition to that, the book has very little action [*laughs*].

There's the famous stairwell fight in the movie that everyone loves that's twelve minutes long and done as a oner—takes up four pages in the graphic novel, and maybe three punches are thrown. Very different. But you

can’t put that on-screen. That’s very dull; I wouldn’t want to watch it. It’d be an incredibly dull movie. And as I say, it was Dave’s idea to say, “Hang on. Obviously, we’re going to amp up the action. But also, can we still make something a noir, but with color? Instead of taking the color away and draining the color, what if we absolutely flood it with color? Can you still make a noir with that style?” And the answer, of course, is *yes.* He absolutely pulled it off. And I give him all the credit for that, and I tip my hat, because it was an absolute piece of genius as far as I’m concerned.

It made the movie so visually distinctive and exciting to watch on-screen, while still keeping that faith to the story, hitting those same story beats. Even the action. It’s almost as if the action takes place off the page. It all fits within the bits you just don’t see in the graphic novel. You could imagine an expanded version of the graphic novel that has those action scenes in it, and it would still be essentially the same book and the same story. So yeah, I was delighted with how faithful it was.

★ ★ ★

Despite the film’s A-list cast and creatives behind the scenes with a proven track record, convincing the studios to finance the feature wasn’t easy. Even as late as 2017, a female-led action movie with no strong male lead was a hard sell. Charlize Theron was herself a pioneer in some ways for female top-lined action films, having starred in a number of some successful (and some less successful) entries in the genre for nearly twenty years prior to Atomic Blonde. *All the while, though, Theron was aware that society and the industry weren’t entirely ready to fully embrace female action heroes as equals to men … yet.*

CHARLIZE THERON

The Italian Job was a great experience in the sense that I realized there was still so much misconception around women in the genre, even though in that film the action is really based on cars and we had to physically do a lot of that stuff. The only good thing that came out of that experience was that there was a real pressure to pull off those stunts with the actors. That was the first time I experienced anything like that, but there was a very unfair process that went with that. I was the only woman with a bunch of

guys, and I remember vividly getting the schedule for preproduction, and they had scheduled me for car training for six weeks, more than any of the guys. It was just so insulting [to me as a woman]. But it was also the thing that put a real fire under my ass.

I made it a point to outdrive all of those guys. But I was very proud of the stunt work that we did in that. I did a stunt in that movie where I do a reverse 360, or maybe 180, in a warehouse with props everywhere and people—I did that stunt completely on my own. It was a huge moment of feeling like, "Yeah, we can do all of this stuff." Women are so unfairly thought of or treated when it comes to the genre.

★ ★ ★

A change in the retrograde perception of female-fronted action films came in the wake of the critical and financial success of 2015's Fury Road, *directed by George Miller, in which Charlize Theron starred as Furiosa, blowing Tom Hardy's Mad Max off the screen in the postapocalyptic action classic.*

CHARLIZE THERON

I don't think I'll ever recover from the making of that film. It was a tremendous feat, what we pulled off, all of us. It was difficult in a different way than what I had just described with *Atomic Blonde.* The physicality was very real. It was very, very rare that George [Miller] wanted the stunt team to rely on too much wirework. A lot of the physical lifting in that movie was real. Holding your body up on a car, pulling yourself out of a car, getting over to another vehicle or action that was happening here on driving vehicles consistently. It was incredibly tedious. But that was the challenge in that. I think when a filmmaker can listen to just the narrative, the story of *Mad Max* is supposed to make you feel incredibly exhausted. You're supposed to be on a three-day car chase, and that is just exhausting. And it became an exhausting shoot. I mean, he physically got us all to a place where none of that was being manufactured. It came from such a real place.

In general, I'm intrigued by the messiness of being a human, especially a woman. For me, when we talk about representation, not just racial

representation and cultural representation but female representation, I remember vividly just feeling such a lack of watching conflicted women in cinema. I felt like there was always a part of me, as an actor, that felt so unbelievably jealous of people like Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro, who got to play all of these really fucked-up people. As a woman, I very rarely got to explore that. It was like there was this inherent fear of putting a woman in circumstances where she might not shine. I do believe society has still somewhat of this Madonna/whore complex box. Like, we can either be really good hookers or we can be really good mothers, but anything in between—people are sometimes not brave enough to want to go and explore. And it's so sad to me, because the richness of those stories are not only great, entertaining stories to tell and great movies to make, but it's a disservice to women in general. We are more complicated than those two things, and we can be many things.

Our strengths can come from our faults and from our mistakes and from our vulnerabilities and our madness. Those are the things that make us interesting. And so I have a knee-jerk reaction when anybody ever pitches me a story or has this first line like, "She is a warrior and she is a hero." It oversimplifies the complexities and the beauty of what it means to be a woman, and I've never, ever striven to inherently underline those qualities in any of the characters that I played. I think all of my characters have had this sense of they're all survivors. They're all just trying to survive, and that I can relate to as a woman. I am not a hero. I don't relate to heroes. People who inspire me are people who don't think of themselves as heroes. They put their head down. They do the work. I have an affinity for that. I like that. That is a quality that I really respond to. And so I don't want any of the characters that I play to feel like women that we can't sit in a cinema and say, "Yeah, I see a little bit of myself in there."

★ ★ ★

Filming of Atomic Blonde *began on November 22, 2015, in Budapest, and later moved to Berlin. Joining the cast was James McAvoy as Percival, John Goodman as Kurzfeld, Eddie Marsan as Spyglass, Sofia Boutella as Lasalle, and Toby Jones as Eric Gray. Prior to filming on* Atomic Blonde, *Charlize Theron had to undergo eight weeks of intensive training to prepare*

for the role—utilizing much of the same stunt/training team from John Wick.

DAVID LEITCH

In delivering these ultraviolent action scenes that put us in the right place at the right time in the movie, Charlize is a great collaborator. A tremendous talent. She threads the needle and makes it all work, because without an actress like that, you can't do a movie like this.

JACKSON SPIDELL
(stunt double, Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* films)

She was a monster. It was really cool, because her and Keanu go very far back. They've worked together a couple of times, and they've maintained their friendship. And so when Keanu was training for *John Wick 2,* Charlize was in the gym at the same time training for *Atomic Blonde.* They would kind of amp each other up and rile each other up and just give each other shit.

JONATHAN SELA

At the end of the day, it's bigger because the content you're grabbing is bigger. The set pieces require more tools and more money. I think there's a beauty in that middle range, because there's more freedom in it. When you find yourself in that corner, well, that corner is not really a corner—we're still making a movie with real actors, and you have days and lights and cameras. But you do have compromises, and those compromises are really helpful, and it's where you shine with your instincts and true artistic voice. I have to make a choice here, and you really know what the right choice is. The director wants this, the actor wants this, and the studio has their idea. There's too many voices. It doesn't always get on the screen, but it still costs a lot of money. We do waste a lot of money. That's inevitable. That's the way this works. More options, or concepts, more things that need to be filmed. That translates to more costs.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

I was only there on set for a few days. It was very much a visit, I was not there on the day-to-day. And yes, I didn't want to be, because I know

quite often people can get very nervous around original IP creators, because they think they'll suddenly blow a gasket at some of the changes that are being made. But the thing that gave me heart, apart from the fact that these people are all brilliant at what they do and it was wonderful just watching actors be great, was when I got to chat with Charlize briefly in between takes, and I realized that she got the character. That she understood Lorraine. Yes, she plays her differently than in the book. Yes, she has blond hair instead of the dark hair in the book. Whatever. Those are, as far as I'm concerned, superficialities and, like I said, go towards making it a good cinematic experience. But she got the core of the character. She understood who Lorraine is, why she's doing what she does, and her contemptuous view of the men who are surrounding her. She absolutely nailed that. I loved *John Wick*, so it was great having Dave direct; I was very happy about that. Seeing the sets come to life, that was all wonderful and heartening, but more than anything else, the thing that gave me faith that it would be good was just that brief chat with Charlize where I realized, "Oh, she gets it." Because of course, it was her company producing it, so she was calling the shots. That immediately just made me feel so good and gave me that reassurance that, "Oh, we're in good hands. It's going to be okay, because she gets it, and she's in this particular instance the one in charge." So that was great.

JONATHAN SELA

The only time we did green screen in that movie was one or two points in the car … very little. Most of those walls were built on streets in Budapest. A lot of times above the wall, we had to do something, but that was, like, a matte painting. We never really had actors on green screens. When Charlize was in the hotel room, we wanted to see Paris outside the hotel room, but that was just a little comp. A lot of that stuff was done on camera. We did go to Berlin to get some stuff there. Funnily enough, a lot of stuff from that period doesn't actually exist [in Germany anymore], so Budapest was great, because they still had this Eastern European architecture. We'd find a couple of streets or a parking lot and we'd wrap the parking lot with the wall. That looked like it was just there. Looked like East Berlin at that time.

DAVID LEITCH

What I tried to do on this film is to not differentiate the idea of a male or female spy. They're not gonna say, "She's the best female spy we have." They're just gonna say, "She's one of our best agents." We're going to put a female character in there and treat her like a quintessential male character in one of these movies. Just by doing that alone, it feels provocative to some people, but at the end of the day, it's really satisfying, and it's real. There are female spies out in the world that are taking the same risks and going through the same hardships as male spies. It's about time that we make movies where we don't have to differentiate, "Hey, this is a female spy, we need to justify it or talk about it or explain it or make it different." It's the same. She's dealing with the same issues of not knowing who to trust. She's dealing with the same issues of where do you find intimacy when everybody lies. It's classic.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

Charlize Theron's portrayal of the character's flaws shows insight, because if you read the graphic novel at a surface level, you wouldn't necessarily see that in her character. But if you read it again or if you look for the subtext and read between the lines, you will see that, yes, she is a seriously damaged personality. That's one of the things that makes her a great character, I like to think. So it was really heartening to see that Charlize understood that, and that's how she was approaching the character.

DAVID LEITCH

Outside of the action, I think it is more of the existential crisis of the spy and this journey into this world of lies. Then maybe some can relate to in their office or their business or whatever. How do you survive it? How do you navigate it? How do you move on and learn how to find those moments of humanity in a world that's just so brutal and cold? Maybe it'll give you a little more respect for people that are serving in our agencies that have to live these alternate lives and understand how this has separated them from their families and their loved ones.

JONATHAN SELA

Atomic Blonde was one of my favorite experiences ever. Just because visually, me and Dave, we'd barely even talk all day because everything was so busy, and we'd look at each other and go, "That was a really good day! See you tomorrow." Even though we did some work on *John Wick*, we really went deep on it with *Atomic Blonde*. *John Wick*, we had two directors, so we'd break down a lot of the movie, but a lot of things would change. Here it was really me and Dave, and we went in to Budapest. We would sit down every weekend and read the scenes and plan them out. "What if she sits here, what if he sits there, what if they don't look at each other?" We did some rewrites and really played through the whole movie. So the first time we met Charlize, we were like, "This is what we're doing." And maybe she'd have an idea. "No, we think you should do this." "Oh, that's interesting." We really knew the characters better than the actors. We'd already planned it out as this is where they'd start, this is where they'd end. This is where your journey is. It was like going back to film school. In film school, you kind of do all those things that in the real world you just don't get to do. In film school, you talk all about story and characters and the reason you're going to use the red light, et cetera. Everything has to have a concept behind it. It was really, really fun to be able to do that on *Atomic Blonde*. And Dave was all about being able to do that. He wanted to really be prepared. For him, Keanu was a friend, they've known each other for eons. And then you've got Charlize Theron, and it's a little different caliber of people who you have to work with. Give them answers. They're all going to want to feel like they're important and feel like they're being attended to and feel like this director knows this movie.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

David made me a playlist in the beginning. I think every single song is in the movie. He had them all. And he shot some scenes with the music playing.

ANTONY JOHNSTON

I'm not going to lie and say that I was thrilled about the title being changed, but again, because I've been on the other side of the fence, because I'm a creator myself, I completely understand why it was done, and that's because if you're going to make a franchise, you have to center it

around the character. The book was intended to be centered around Berlin, and indeed, *The Coldest Winter,* the second book, is also centered in Berlin. That's kind of the point. But you can't do that with a movie franchise. I understand that. It has to happen. That's it. I totally understand why they did it.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

I don't like to compare *John Wick* and *Atomic Blonde.* They're two completely different movies. Different aesthetics. They're both action movies with tall people. One's a female, the other is a male. That's the only thing that really connects them. If you look at them, not thinking who stands behind it, but *Atomic Blonde* was supposed to be *Coldest City,* which I think with that name it would've done better. I'm so stubborn. It is a Cold War story, and it's about humans who build walls around themselves to protect them and don't know how much they can rely on each other, they're always suspicious, and they're always lying. That's basically what the movie is about. I think it's an amazing script, but a completely different movie. Shot in Budapest, not New York, a beautiful city. And yeah, we rely a bit more on visual effects. Again, when I say that, both films relied heavily on visual effects, because there's blood and muzzle flashes—all of that more or less are visual effects. Very few exceptions. *Coldest City* is a period piece as well. Parts of it are happening in London, yet it's all shot in Budapest.

DAVID LEITCH

I think the audience was not prepared for the ultraviolence juxtaposed to the pop sensibility of the piece. That's one of the provocative choices that I wanted to make. It's entertainment, and it is supposed to be wish fulfillment—this referential eighties vibe—but I wanted the stakes for Charlize's character to be real and the consequences to be real. In that third act when she finishes in the stairwell and she's walking back to the East, it's this moment of like, "Holy crap. The movie has just spun very dark, and there's no one left to trust." Having been in screenings, that's when the audience goes quiet, in a good way. Like, "Oh. I was having so much fun, but now this is really serious and I like this person, and I hope they make it out."

★ ★ ★

Perhaps the film's most memorable action scene is the single-take stairway brawl as Lorraine attempts to escort her asset, Spyglass, to safety in the West. Confronted with Percival's betrayal, Broughton is forced to seek shelter in an abandoned apartment building in East Berlin, where she fights off hordes of Stasi agents in an uninterrupted shot that puts even Hitchcock's Rope *and Robert Altman's opening to* The Player *to shame. What started in the graphic novel as a short sequence with hardly any action became a tense, thrilling, life-or-death struggle both in and out of the film.*

JONATHAN SELA

In the script, it was rewritten as, "She gets shot, she's up in a building, there's a fight," but when we put it on the schedule, it was, "Okay, first we do that," but we didn't have much second unit. There were maybe six or seven days of that, and then there's this fight, and the fight goes onto the street. Two, three days of first unit; two, three days of second unit. Then one day came and we all looked at each other, and I said, "You know, we've all done car chases. When we did *Die Hard*, we had twenty-one days of second unit, twenty days of this. What can we do in this amount of days that's different, that's going to stand out differently?" And someone said, "What if we do one shot?" And we're all looking at each other, confused. Then the stunt coordinator went, "No, no, we can do all this great stuff!" So everyone went home and sat with it. It took two or three weeks until everyone came around, because in the beginning, it was like, "I don't know, I don't know." But everybody came up to the challenge. "Oh, we can do it. We can do it great." It became another thing where everybody would finally go, "Oh, we can figure this out." So it kind of formed an emotional arc for everybody to go from "I don't know if this is a good idea … How can we make it … What can we do…" to "I think we can do it. We can make it amazing."

The stunt coordinator starts going at it and doing all the fights. What can Charlize do to make it fast enough that the energy's right? Millions of little things. You end up shooting in chronological order, because that's the only way you can do it. You start with one and finish with the last one. I think it took eight or nine days to do, from beginning to end. But it was fun

to do, fun to watch. The challenge was just doing all the homework. On the days, the practices were pretty straightforward, because you knew when you got it. You just knew. There was no, “Oh yeah, we can put it all together and it’ll be great.” No. We needed to keep on going until it was great. And Charlize was a big part of that. It wasn’t, “Oh, we got it, let’s move on.” Here they had the incentive to watch every take and see, “Oh yes, this didn’t work, I have to do it again.” It was a really fun filmmaking experience for everybody.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

Well, it’s an amazing sequence. It was actually [producer] Kelly McCormick’s idea; David has stated openly that it was Kelly’s idea to do it as a one-take. Again, just an amazing crew, stunt coordinator, people that know their jobs very, very well, and stunt doubles and stuntmen. We had to test every edit. When we’re inside, it’s more or less just edits. There are two or three shots that are visual effect–assisted, but as we go out, it’s all visual effects. It’s crazy visual effects work.

CHARLIZE THERON

The stunt coordinators on that film set the tone on the set: “We want to do long action takes. We want to do continuous. Logistically, we have to shoot seven to ten minutes of action continuously.” I know that sounds like nothing, but as a performer, that means that you have to get everything right in seven to ten minutes. And that is an incredibly difficult thing to do, especially for actors and for myself. I’m not a martial arts fighter, I’ve never trained in martial arts. But it’s plausible, and that’s what’s so incredible. I was really proud of the action that we accomplished in *Atomic Blonde.* It felt to me like we were pushing the envelope. We celebrate women fighting like women. We’re smarter about what body parts we will be using—we know we can’t really punch, because we’ll break every bone in our hand, but we can fight just as hard with our elbows, with our heads, with our knees. That was when it became really exciting to me. I think that what’s great is that there is no one way, but that we definitely pushed it. You can look at a film like *Fury Road*—there’s definitely more editing in that film. George Miller style, shooting his action is fast-paced, but it’s done in a way that doesn’t feel like a cheat. I think editorially, we’ve always cheated

action. And when you don’t cheat it, people really know. They can feel it. And that authenticity has been really celebrated in the last decade.

★ ★ ★

The film also features a nonlinear structure and a surprising twist ending. The ability to maintain a compelling story, while constructing it more like a jigsaw puzzle, rested on the shoulders of John Wick *editor Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir.*

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

Endless trials, failures, and trials again. Because obviously, we had to cut a lot down. Just for pacing and for length, et cetera. But also, sometimes things can complicate—even though they’re there to help us understand, they can actually complicate things more. Does that make sense? I always look at it as a canyon. Like, you can make a small one that people can jump over, and that’s good, because then people can follow the story. Or you can make a canyon where people just give up, and they can’t go with the story. We were trying so hard. It is a complicated story, because we, as the audience, are being lied to the whole time. That’s basically it. And because you’re being lied to the whole time, you’re trying to help people in the end understand what is happening. We kind of went the middle way, I think, of trying to make it understandable, but so precisely that you could also just skip it and enjoy it as a film. We didn’t want to make it too clever for people. We were trying to make it clever, but still so you could also just watch it as a fun ride and not get completely lost.

★ ★ ★

For a film with such constant and deliberate crosscutting, one might think there were myriad scenes or moments lost in the edit on the cutting room floor.

ELÍSABET RONALDSDÓTTIR

No. Nothing. It doesn’t mean there isn’t gold there, but you go through a process of killing your darlings. And it is a process; it’s not done like

“this.” You think about it, you talk about it, you have meetings about it, you go through this whole discussion, this whole process, of getting rid of that part. So if it’s gone, you’ve worked your way out of a relationship, you know? You’re not going to look back. It’s done. Nothing ends up on the editing floor by mistake. It’s all carefully thought out. Sometimes I consider it a bad decision, but that’s a different thing.

Atomic Blonde *was released in theaters on July 28, 2017, to mostly positive reviews and went on to earn over $100 million against a $30 million budget. Successful enough to where talks began for a sequel—although it has yet to see the light of a projector bulb. After the success of another Charlize Theron top-lined actioner at Netflix,* The Old Guard, *Netflix has shown interest in financing the long-gestating sequel project.*

ANTONY JOHNSTON

As far as I know, everybody involved creatively wants to do it. Everybody wants to make an *Atomic Blonde 2*. The issue has been convincing somebody to put the money up for it. Because it’s Hollywood, that’s always the issue. We’ve been planning a sequel since the first movie was made. Everybody has wanted to make a sequel, no question. It’s just a question of getting everything lined up and getting the money in place. But then, that’s the case for 99 percent of all movies ever made, isn’t it?

The whole experience has been surreal—but also highly enjoyable. Once again, I know how fortunate I am to say that. Because I know of people and I also know people personally who have had their books adapted and it’s been an absolute nightmare of an experience. Whereas for me and Sam—I should mention Sam the artist on the book who got to come along on this ride with me—for both of us, it was nothing but an enjoyable experience. We got to do the red carpet. I got to do it twice, because we did Berlin as well as Los Angeles. We got to hang out with the stars and go to parties and what have you and treated like royalty for weeks. And all for a movie we both genuinely thought was great.

10 JOHN WICK WILL RETURN

"Have you thought this through? I mean, chewed down to the bone? You got out once. You dip so much as a pinkie back into this pond … you may well find something reaches out … and drags you back into its depths."

With the continuing success of the John Wick *franchise in cinemas, home video, and multimedia, including comic books and video games, it seemed inevitable that the franchise would continue to grow while simultaneously influencing other films and the action genre as a whole. Meanwhile, low-budget action, which had almost been consigned to the direct-to-video ghetto, had become one of the most important franchises in Lionsgate's library. Although plans had been to initially shoot* John Wick 4 *and* 5 *back-to-back pre-pandemic, plans were scuttled by COVID. Instead,* John Wick 4 *finally went into production in mid-2021 for a March 2023 theatrical release.*

J. J. PERRY
(stunts, *John Wick*; supervising stunt coordinator, *John Wick: Chapter 2*)

After doing the first two movies, everybody called our team at 87eleven and said, "Hey, we want to do that *John Wick*–style." And I always ask, "Why? We already did it. You have to be looking for the next thing now." "Well, what's the next thing?" I said, "I don't know. Maybe it's knife fighting mixed with break dancing. I don't know what you'd do now. We're all looking for it, brother. We're out there searching for it."

BASIL IWANYK
(producer, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 4*)

These films are always ambitious. We started out on *John Wick 4* with some big action sequences and beat the crap out of these stuntmen and actors. It boggles the mind how much bigger this one is compared to the previous three movies. It's crazy to me. And it's never enough. If I call Chad tomorrow and he says, "I need $20 million additional," in three weeks, he'd be, "I need $23 million." It's madness.

J. J. PERRY

Everything's an evolution. A lot of us can make a great career doing the same shit for the next six, seven years and make a ton of dough. But do I want to? I want to go find the next thing. And that's the 87eleven kind of —well, at least that used to be our modus operandi, our mission statement. Find what's new. Let's invent something or take something that's been done, throw it on its head, dissect it, change it, make it better, film it differently. It's not just choreographies; it's how it's shot, how it's edited, how it's sound-designed, how it's acted.

BASIL IWANYK

There's always the fear that as you go bigger, you go worse. The only thing we did was we had more toys. When you're designing action sequences and thinking about the script, you're always like, "Ugh, I wish we had more money. We'd do this." All of a sudden, we were given everything we wanted in terms of toys, so we had a horse chase in the middle of New York, we closed off the Verrazzano Bridge, we built this glass house. We did all these crazy things. It was terrifying in that we realized we had a big movie. It was the first time we realized we had a big movie with big swings and a lot of pressure on it. It was the first time, where we went into post, we felt the pressure of delivery. On *John Wick 1,* there was no pressure. With *John Wick 2,* everyone was like, "This needs to do well." The chairman of Lionsgate was paying attention to it. Everybody was. That was what made it the scariest of all of them.

In a lot of ways, *John Wick 4* feels like we're playing with a house of money a little bit. Because, one, we can't believe we're on the fourth movie. We're coming off the pandemic, so there's such goodwill to see anything interesting. And *John Wick 3* was when we felt we were in the big leagues.

Things got nuts because of the pandemic. There was a period of time where we could have taken *John Wick 4*, added some more pages to that, and split that in half. We had a cool idea for *John Wick 5*, we got Scott Frank to do a treatment on it, so there was a lot of stuff. We were getting through it, and then the pandemic hit and it all was put on hold. In retrospect, knowing how hard these movies are, I don't know how we could have gotten through *John Wick 4* and *5* at the same time.

J. J. PERRY

The best kind of choreography for me is when you create a problem for your protagonist and then you show how they solve it. This is clever choreography, and it takes you right back to the eighties Jackie Chan stuff. Bruce Lee never gets hit, he just beats everyone up. Cool to watch, but it becomes boring after a while. Steven Seagal never gets hit, he's just throwing people around with aikido. It's boring after a while. But when you get into the storytelling of it and you see your protagonist finding a problem, getting caught up in a problem, and then you show how clever he is by solving it either by his wits or using the environment that he's in, whatever it is, this is clever choreography that resonates with people.

EVAN SCHIFF
(editor, *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*)

We've never really done a first-person-shooter type thing; that's not really Chad's style, but certainly the rapid dispatching of enemies feels like a video game. I don't know how much Chad actually plays video games … I know he tries to keep up on what's popular, but I've never heard him come in and say, "I was on my PS5 yesterday…" I remember, though, the *Fortnite* guys came in, because we had a *Fortnite* tie-in, and I felt bad because I don't think any of us had actually played *Fortnite*. Those guys were like, "Can we send you a flag or a shirt or something like that?" And we were like, "Sure … That'd be fun." I knew that my little cousins were obsessed with *Fortnite*, I knew how big of a business it was and how many people worldwide were playing it. I think the influence video games have had on the *John Wick* series is maybe tangential or subconscious, and not necessarily overt—"We're going to make this look like a video game."

J. J. PERRY

87eleven is the laboratory, man. It's pride that we want to do something new and fresh. And I don't know if it's still the way; I've been on the road so much, away from home. I have my crew of 87eleven guys here, my OG crew here with me. Chad's got a few guys with him. There's not tons of us left. Joe Joe's out there doing his own thing. Valera's out there doing … They're doing great stuff. But every time I see a movie that some of my friends worked on from the 87eleven crew, there's always something fresh in it, because we all have that same never-say-die attitude, never-say-repeat attitude. Let's never say, "Let's just do the old." Let's find something new and fresh. And that's part of 87eleven. It was the pressure cooker, man. Invitation only. You couldn't just show up at 87 and join. You had to be invited.

BASIL IWANYK

Most of the time when we start, it's a blank slate. You could argue that the mirrored room in *John Wick 2* and the glass house in *John Wick 3* are just a more amplified version of the other. The motorcycle action sequence was inspired by *The Villainess,* a Korean action movie that came out around the same time. John Wick on a horse was just some absurd idea Chad came up with, which was definitely not part of *John Wick 2.* That blank slate is why Lionsgate's been great partners; everything we've tried to jam into the franchise, we've been able to do.

If you think about our movies, even though we don't have big budgets, we've shot the majority of them in New York, we're in Rome, Morocco, Japan, Paris, Jordan—they've given us everything we've wanted. They may bitch and moan, we may bitch and moan, but at the end of the day, we've got everything we can get. There have been some casting options that we haven't been able to get. I think we've offered Peter Dinklage a role in every single *John Wick* movie, but he clearly hates them. There are people we've always went after that we couldn't grab.

J. J. PERRY

Everybody's kind of doing their own thing now. It's not what it used to be, unfortunately, but I still have my loyalty to my team and my brothers. People like Jackson Spidell, Danny Hernandez, Jon Eusebio, Joe Eusebio,

John Valera, and Eric Brown, Justin Yu—those guys are directly involved with the look and style of *John Wick* and anything that's gun-jitsu. We were the ones that went out there and pressure-tested it and cooked it up with Chad. Chad as the director oversaw his vision, and we went out and facilitated for him.

DEREK KOLSTAD
(screenwriter, *John Wick: Chapter 1* through *Chapter 3*)

Dynamite Comics did a prequel comic book series, and the writer involved with that, Greg Pak, is fucking amazing, but I don't think you can do a *John Wick* prequel for film and TV. Do you remember *Jaws*? You don't want to see a flashback to Robert Shaw and the USS *Indianapolis*, because the story is just so powerful. I would much rather hear much more about the story from other characters and their perspective than see it.

BASIL IWANYK

This situation is a little bit like the TV show *Lost*, where they had no idea what that island was and they'd unpeel certain things. We don't have a *John Wick* bible. We don't have something that says, "Here's the story of John Wick." We really don't. We're making this up as we go along, so the challenge of this is the danger of boxing ourselves into a corner. And people were so fascinated with this character after two movies that we needed to give them some idea. I remember when Keanu read the script for *John Wick 3*, and about the ballerina, he said, "Wait, I was a ballerina growing up?" We were like, "No, no, no!" [*Laughs.*]

CHAD STAHELSKI
(codirector, *John Wick*; director, *John Wick: Chapter 2* through *Chapter 4*)

We could be like, "Hey, you know that John Wick was a Navy SEAL, and he did this, this, and this?" We don't talk about it, we just showed it to you so that you believed in the character. You don't have to be told what he can do; you've seen it. Not only did you see it, you saw the individual playing John Wick do it, and that buys his credibility by his honesty as the character. You see someone who cries over a puppy and fights female assassins in his boxer shorts.

DEREK KOLSTAD

As a fanboy of other movies, I don't think you could ever do me justice to how I saw the backstory with John killing a man with a pencil. But I would love to have another character come in and go, "You know what I saw that night?" That's what I think would make it even better.

BASIL IWANYK

There are characters in the script that have like one or two scenes, and all of a sudden, we're getting excited about an actor, and the role gets bigger. Anjelica Huston was a perfect example of that. Halle Berry, before we had a script, met with Chad and said, "I've been working out, I've turned my life around physically, I want to be in a *John Wick* movie." That was the early days of *John Wick 3,* so that was something we had from the get-go—we just had to make sure we had a role for her.

Halle directed a film that I produced called *Bruised,* and Chad came in for like no money to help us direct the action sequences, and she did an amazing job. We're hoping we can figure out a way for her to direct a spin-off of her *John Wick 3* character looking for her daughter and that kind of thing.

J. J. PERRY

When we're searching for ideas, we're on YouTube, we're looking for any obscure, trippy, weird anything. There's a library at 87eleven that we referenced from YouTube clips that we all share, that are interesting, different shapes, and that's a lot of the fun of it, too—the shapes that you put in the box. You know what I mean? It's all about shapes and rhythms, and that's my take on gun-jitsu, my friend. I wouldn't call it gun fu. I know Chad does, but if we have to get technical as a martial artist that is an action guy, there's no kung fu in that. He's shooting people that do kung fu, but he's doing jujitsu mixed with guns, with judo, jujitsu, and sambo mixed with guns. That's it right there.

This is the hardest part because after *1*, *2*, and *3*, it's like, "Okay, what do you do next?" What is he going to use? Rocket launchers? He's going to connect the machine guns to his legs, and when he's kicking, they shoot? I know what they're doing, because I saw it and we all talked about it, because we were all training out of the same gym before I left to do my

movie. It's clever, but it's hard to not be redundant, because now that we've done so much jujitsu and judo, anyone in any TV show or movie that throws someone on the floor, reaches for a rolling arm bar, pulls a pistol on the way out, stands up, and shoots somebody, people go, "Oh, *John Wick.*" That's the tricky part, and it's hard. They have a tall order with *4.* I know their team. They have a great team with them. They have a new young man training Keanu by the name of Dave Camarillo. He's a next-level jujitsu guy. They have that guy on their roster right now, and he's a gem of a human.

BASIL IWANYK

It's hard, because it could be very easy to lose our North Star, who we are as a franchise, who John Wick is and what his journey is. Originally, in *John Wick 4,* we were going to make it three years later. We wanted to break the timeline, we wanted to start fresh, we didn't want to have the pressure of all these things that we had to pay off. Then the more we went through it, the more we realized that we left a lot of things hanging in the third one and that we had to pay these things off. *John Wick 2* was extraordinarily hard. That was the hardest one, because we were like, "What the hell do we do? We already killed the dog." We thought that was the real hook of the movie, and we were confused on what to do there. *John Wick 3,* much easier, because it was kind of chasing off of *John Wick 2.* On *John Wick 4,* it's a little bit like, "Where are we going as a franchise? Where is he going as a character? Who are we introducing? What are the emotional stakes?" It's been a tough one. Ultimately, we have the best script we've had. That's the irony of it all, partly because we had a lot of time, but we also went through an enormous amount of options.

J. J. PERRY

It's not easy. I get hired all the time, and I've done ten pictures since *John Wick 2,* but I refuse to do that style, because we did it already. I'll tell actors, "Look, if you really want to do it, we'll do something like this, but all we're doing is copying." And once he's an action guy and you say, "Oh, come on, let's just do the old…," you've just died a small death there. You've given up. You've not done your diligence to try and be new and fresh. You've just said, "Ah, let's just do the old…" There's a bunch of

movies coming out that are going to be big knockoffs of the *John Wick* style, complete knockoffs. And they're going to be cool and enjoyable, because they're well acted, but they didn't get there first.

BASIL IWANYK

John Wick 4 feels more like a proper movie than the other ones. If you really break them down, it's like, "What's the plot? Who are the bad guys? I'm so confused." We've never given John—except for Mark Dacascos in *3*—an equal to fight. And Donnie Yen … man, you should see the dailies. His speed, I've never seen anything like it. You think we ramp these things up? He is just from another planet. So for the first time, it feels like we have John fighting someone he can lose to. That was great!

★ ★ ★

When it came to John Wick: Chapter 4, *it's a film that faced a succession challenge that none of its predecessors had, including—but extending beyond—the pandemic.*

BASIL IWANYK

What was really crazy was that the entire studio upper management was cleared out halfway through the movie. When Joe Drake and Nathan Kahane came in [at Lionsgate], they brought new physical production people in, and a lot of people got fired. And a lot of them were people that we were really close with and good friends with. People that were there from the beginning. So that was destabilizing, to say the least. They were all there from the get-go, there was always an affection because we all crawled our way out of the hole. So when Joe and Nathan and all the new people came in, they had no institutional knowledge of the *John Wick* process. In good and bad ways. The good ways were that they came in and were like, "This is a huge asset for the studio, and we're tasked with making sure the movies are good, the world is expanded." There was never a question about that. The bad ways were, and they learned, the unconventional *John Wick* process. Not just in shooting but in the post process.

When *John Wick* is five minutes too long, it's a pain to watch. When it's forty-five to fifty minutes too long, it's literally torture. The old regime got that. Joe and Nathan were like, "What the fuck is this?! This is madness."

Now it's important to stress, they soon got what it was and understood the process, but it was definitely a big switch. With *John Wick 4,* we're a major part of the studio—right up there with *Hunger Games* and *Twilight.* But we're still alive, and our IP has only grown since the start of the pandemic. Everybody has downloaded *John Wick 1*, *2,* or *3.* We are now part of the establishment. Which means we get more toys, and we get to play with more money, but now people are staring at us and making sure not just commercially we do well, but when do we look like we're sellouts? Everyone is hovering around us and waiting for that.

★ ★ ★

A TV show spin-off of the franchise was announced soon after the second film, to be released on Starz, the premium cable channel owned by Lionsgate. While initially planned as a contemporary dramatic series set in the Continental with Keanu Reeves presumably making occasional appearances, The Continental *is now planned as a miniseries of three ninety-minute telefilms about the hotel's origins set against the backdrop of seedy 1970s Manhattan. With the COVID-19 pandemic, work on the series stalled, though in 2021, it picked up again with the hiring of Albert Hughes (*From Hell, The Book of Eli*) as supervising director and Greg Coolidge and Kirk Ward as showrunners. In perhaps the miniseries' biggest coup,* Lethal Weapon*'s Mel Gibson (*Braveheart, Payback*) joined the production as Cormac, one of the series leads, and Colin Woodell playing a young Winston Scott.*

BASIL IWANYK

I love prequels—they're really cool. Maybe it's just me. One of the things I love about this is the way in, using the 1970s and the birth of Winston and the birth of the new Continental. First of all, it's awesome, because there are little Easter eggs all along the way with young versions of characters we've seen in all three movies. But everything we do in *John*

Wick 4, we can go back and tweak it in *The Continental.* So it's television, on a television budget, and on Starz, who have been great. This scratches a bit of the itch for the audience that wants to know a little bit more about the world and how the world got there. How long has the Continental been there? Who is Winston? How did he meet Charon? What happened? What are these consciously oblique references that we never answer? One thing that Derek Kolstad said he really likes doing for his movies is, "Hey, John, I haven't seen you since Hong Kong." We never answer it. The writers for *The Continental* studied each of Ian McShane's lines, to give a logic to it. So I think this is more about expanding the universe and taking a new way in. This is more of a gangster's story, rather than a straight-out action movie.

DEREK KOLSTAD

On *The Continental* TV show, I'm a non-writing executive producer. I don't have anything to do with it. I'm looped in from time to time, but in defense of the studio, I didn't have any TV credits before then. Now I have quite a few. But it's just timing. In everything you do, you could pooh-pooh the fact of being involved or not being involved, but I want that thing to fucking succeed. This thing has my grandfather's—who is still alive—name on it. You'd love to get involved in a certain capacity, but if it's outside your purview, you don't bitch about it.

BASIL IWANYK

We've been pretty dormant about expanding the world until pretty recently. Now I think a cynic would say, "Oh, because everybody is buying and selling companies, you're looking to fatten the goose." That's what a cynic would say, but for me, a hopeful person, it's people finding the value of this universe. So we have this prequel series that's green-lit, we have a couple of spin-offs that will be announced.

Like I said, I would love to see a spin-off with Halle, bring in Common, bring in all the characters that we know and like, and make a *John Wick* world movie. The big question is, is it about John and Keanu or is about the world and the vibe? Who knows? I guess we'll find out when the spin-off comes out.

Any of the spin-offs we're talking about are more of the craziness of the *John Wick* world. A continuation of it. The spin-offs are one degree away from John. Characters we may have seen or interacted with. Or in a perfect world, we have a scene you may have seen in *John Wick 1* or *3* from a different point of view, but it's all in the same spot. I think this is more reflective of the question of, "Does the *John Wick* world have legs?" The TV show is a completely different look into it. If we went into the TV show saying, "Let's just do the TV version of *John Wick* with less money," it'd be shit. There's a different challenge there. Albert Hughes is directing it, and it's going to be fucking awesome.

★ ★ ★

At this point, it's difficult to imagine a John Wick *film without Keanu Reeves, who seems to be very much the heart and soul of the series on set and off. Of course, when he's just wrapped one of these movies after finishing the punishing martial arts training, relentless production, and action as an actor in his midfifties, one wonders how long he can continue in the role. It's seemingly redolent of that moment in 2015 when the James Bond movie* Spectre *was released and an exhausted Daniel Craig was asked if he would be returning to the role to which he famously replied that he'd rather "slash his wrists with broken glass" than play Bond again. Cut to several years later and Craig was back for his fifth and final turn as agent 007 in* No Time to Die. *One would imagine that, ultimately, Keanu, who loves the* Wick *films a lot more than Craig ever did the* Bond *series, will be back as well—and there are obviously a lot of people who hope he will be.*

BASIL IWANYK

After every movie, there's always been a conversation with Keanu where he's like, "Fuck this, I'm not doing it anymore." I remember during the *John Wick 3* premiere, we were talking about how they want to do a *John Wick 4*, and Keanu was like, "Who are you going to get to play John?" It's exhausting, it wipes him out, he stresses about it coming out—it takes a lot out of him. He sells the shit out of the movie, he takes it very seriously. It's not just a job for him, it's a crusade. Then the movie comes out,

hopefully it does well, he feels good, the dust clears, and then he's like, "Hmmm, maybe we should do another one."

KEANU REEVES
(actor, "John Wick")

I do love playing this role. I think I love his will. I like his passion. I love his grief. I like that he gets knocked down, but he keeps going and gets back up.

MIKE HOSTENCH
(deputy director, Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival)

I would say that the antiheroes of the spaghetti Westerns, martial arts cinema, and also the French noir were quite monosyllabic in the same way as Wick is. Clint Eastwood, Jimmy Wang Yu, or Alain Delon played anti-loquacious characters that only spoke when strictly necessary and most certainly only as a preface to violence. Keanu Reeves is a mix of the cynical hit man or maverick detective of the American noir film of the 1940s and 1950s and the antiheroes mentioned before. The dark humor Wick transpires in is a direct influence of both worlds.

HARVEY O'BRIEN
(author, *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back*)

I've always liked him, I have to say, right back to *Parenthood* and *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, and I never went through a period of thinking him limited or uninteresting even when he did some clunkers, like any working actor, sure, but I'm not someone that ever dismissed him outright, so I think he works really well at the heart of these films. He's physically impressive, and he nails the low-key seriousness of tone and intention he needs in order to be convincing and hold the center in a series prone to cartoonishness. I think part of the hype around it was people suddenly taking him seriously who had categorized him as a has-been.

There was a more general "old guy action" strain at the time, partly triggered by Liam Neeson in *Taken*, and of course, one needs to remember how old Charles Bronson was in *Death Wish* and that even John Wayne had a go at rogue cop movies near the end. Of course, now we see the line extending with Bob Odenkirk in *Nobody* "from the makers of *John Wick*."

Reeves, a nineties figure for people, was suddenly trendy again partly interlinked with his quite high-profile, low-key life and real-world backstory. I think that sense of rediscovery was part of the film's broader appeal. But again, I enjoyed his work as I've always enjoyed it, so he "works" for me as an element of the films, sometimes enough to carry it.

BASIL IWANYK

Keanu is coauthor of this franchise, no question. He has a very clear point of view. When I was a young executive at Warners, somebody was talking about my boss having green-light power. The chairman of Warners at the time, Bob Daly, said, "It doesn't matter about his green-light power, I have red-light power, and that's all the power you need." Keanu has red-light power. We would come up with what we thought were incredible premises or ways into a movie, and we'd get one note, which would be, "No."

JASON CONSTANTINE
(president of coproduction and acquisitions, Lionsgate)

Keanu, in the audience's eyes, became an action hero when he did *Speed.* He's an action star in *Speed* just like Bruce Willis became an action star with *Die Hard.* A year before *Die Hard* was in cinemas and they were casting the guy from *Moonlighting*, Bruce Willis, to star in an action movie, everyone's like, "What?! That guy is a comedian!" It's one of the great inspired casting choices of all time, and Bruce Willis is an action star, but at the time it was announced, no one could believe it.

RIC MEYERS
(author, *Films of Fury: The Kung Fu Movie Book*)

This is my favorite Keanu Reeves story. After showing his versatility and willingness to take chances in everything from *River's Edge* (1986) to *Little Buddha* (1993), where he played Siddhartha of all people, they offered him the script for *Speed* (1994). At the time, it was an obvious knockoff of *Die Hard,* featuring a self-conscious hero who used the life-and-death situations just as an excuse to make tone-deaf wisecracks.

Reportedly, Reeves saw the promise in the idea, but handed it back with these words: "Gentlemen, I think we can do better." To me, in a

nutshell, that is the soul of Keanu Reeves. By having the crew treat the situation as believably as possible, he turned a rip-off into a hit. *The Matrix* was to come five years later, and then he spent well-intentioned years surviving weakening sequels, interesting ideas that didn't quite come together, and nice tries … until *John Wick* arrived. So now, as a legit movie legend, he can wink, and we can smile, at his participation in *Toy Story 4* (2019) and *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run* (2020), knowing we all are in the presence of greatness.

BASIL IWANYK

Keanu is very much involved early on. He's a coauthor of not just his character but of the universe as well. He's the ultimate gentleman, he's a great collaborator, he's a fighter, he's smart and he thinks these things through, and he has a great instinct for it. But I would say with *4*, he was even more involved with the script development than even I was. He was with Chad a lot, because Chad worked on *The Matrix 4* in Germany, and he and Chad got there in February for *John Wick 4*. I didn't go to Germany until June. So there was a lot of time they had together.

GLEN OLIVER
(film historian)

John Wick was originally influenced by a number of pictures like *The Killer*, *Hard Boiled*, *Vengeance*, *Oldboy*, and *I Saw the Devil*, all of which were raw, direct, and unapologetic like *Wick*. Perhaps most significantly, though, was the ghost of the Clint Eastwood/Sergio Leone movies, which deliberately obfuscated, or flat-out ignored, laying too much backstory for their antihero protagonists. Minimum context, maximum now. This conceit was often adapted and utilized by John Carpenter, particularly in the Snake Plissken character.

It's an interesting and clearly effective approach to storytelling: I personally believe that decluttering the narrative by minimizing detailed backstories invites viewers to more fully invest in the immediacy of what is happening. We're not so worried about why mystery hero did *x*—we're instead responding to the notion that antihero did *x*, and it's much easier to ask questions like: "Should he or she really have done that?" or "Was that really necessary?" And perhaps most importantly, that obfuscation—that

simplification—of background, I think, allows viewers to connect with antiheroes on a more shameless and visceral level. Removing the background justification for a character's actions more efficiently invites viewers to posit,"What would I have done?" Objectively, that's a pretty great tool and hook.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

John Wick masterfully mines its many influences, and I know the filmmakers have happily divulged the movies that inspired them. But I feel like *Oldboy*—in particular, its incredible hammer fight—has to have been a big one. There has to be a pretty direct line you can draw between these two characters, both driven to survive at all costs, even when pushed beyond the brink of exhaustion.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

I enjoyed the first and second more than the third, but all three are well-executed entertainments in the Hong Kong fusion mold. Something about the third one felt overly comic book–like, and I like comic books, don't get me wrong. It felt a little bit like a franchising/merchandising expansion rather than anything that really added value. It certainly didn't have any real impact for me; no "Wow" so much as "Right … so this now." There is story continuity, sure, but ultimately, the enlarging of the "world" in *Chapter 2* worked to enliven the repeat of the formula. Somehow making it even larger again and going international in *Chapter 3* didn't do that for me. It just seemed to cross a line and become more contrived.

GLEN OLIVER

The contribution of the *Mad Max* films to the overall action genre is often overlooked, and I'm not sure why this is. I suspect it has something to do with, while they were largely successful and clearly resonated in the global macro, they didn't penetrate the pop culture zeitgeist as completely as other action titles have managed to do. When you look at the *Mad Max* movies and how they were approached by George Miller and company, their core ingredients are not at all dissimilar to what we find in, say, *John Wick*: hero loses something or someone precious, is snapped by that lost, and launches into a dangerous and challenging environment to address his

resultant internal unrest, often through bone-crunching violence and destruction-causing means. *Max* started with a relatively simple conceit, but grew the scale of its action to the point where action became the driver of the story, rather than the other way around. Which is pretty much what the *Wick* franchise did as it progressed.

Also similarly, the *Max* movies begin ladling in increasingly more vast layers of mythology to support the action universe the main character was inhabiting. *Wick* did the same. Wick, as a character, feels very much informed by the Leone/Eastwood Man with No Name antiheroes. In *Beyond Thunderdome,* Max is, quite literally, introduced to a crowd as "the man with no name"! The *Wick* team has indicated that the Eastwood/Leone films were points of influence for the Wickverse. I'd love to know if, upon closer and more pointed inspection, they might find more than a little Max Rockatansky in there as well. I strongly suspect they might.

MIKE HOSTENCH

I love all three films. I really liked the noir feeling in the Wick character and the production design/art direction of the movie. I also appreciated they took seriously the martial arts sequences—on par with the Indonesian new wave that has conquered the world of action flicks. And the dog element of *John Wick* is fantastic, as it gives the character a cynical and at the same time humane edge that makes it very unique. Like some of the best examples of larger-than-life movies of the last three decades, the whole trilogy is a perfect merge of the classics the directors love and refer to constantly—with a postmodern, innovative, and daring spirit that perfectly fits the taste of contemporary audiences.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

In the late '90s, you had *The Matrix* and some of John Woo's stateside pictures, but by the early 2000s, I remember feeling like that style of nonstop, edge-of-your-seat, balls-to-the-wall action movies had moved back overseas. We had to look again to imports, from guys like Park Chan-wook or Takashi Miike, or films like *Ong-Bak* and *The Raid,* if we wanted that sort of intravenous feed of fast-paced, kinetic, high-impact, visually thrilling action. *John Wick* brought the exhilaration of those films back to Hollywood.

GLEN OLIVER

They are beautifully made, staggeringly executed films that are—if anything—sometimes too exhausting for their own good. For all the amazing stunt work and action choreography, it's sometimes hard to escape the notion that the filmmakers are more interested in knocking audiences into a dazed submission than actually developing stories. This said, there's some wonderful world-building going on in the *Wick* films: the notion of secret societies and secret networks of contacts and people is compelling and even provocative. The films, though, could use an "accessibility pass." I think the action and oomph and viscera would be even more impactful and meaningful if the films didn't feel so Kubrickian in their relatively cold conveyance of its universe.

JASON CONSTANTINE

I certainly think that the *John Wick* franchise has absolutely transformed the action genre. There's lots of ways that it has. It's delivered on the promise of a lot of things we love about the action genre, but it's also done things that really were not common in action movies prior to *John Wick.* Certainly, that's one of those movies with a before and after of the genre.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER
(stunts, *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I absolutely think that the *Wick* films have created their own new genre, and part of that is because of the world that they've created around John Wick. We all love him and we all watch him and want to see all the cool stuff he does, but they created this world that he's a part of that we can't get enough of. It's this crazy, amazing underground world where the currency is different and people have these hidden agendas and hidden places, and it's all this funky underground stuff that regular people don't get to know about. So as someone who's observing this, you get to be a fly on the wall into this crazy world. You see where he comes from, what drives him, and that's what makes it stand out on top of the fact that we've got an actor who's doing all his own fight stuff and who works really hard and does really crazy, funky, cool stuff with a gun. And the fight scenes are shot amazingly, because they're shot by people who have been doing this for years and

years. So I think there's a lot of reasons that *John Wick* has become a new genre.

HALLE BERRY
(actor, "Sofia," *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

It's got Keanu Reeves, who I think is single-handedly one of the only guys of this generation that can really get away with not talking in a film, while still being very present and interesting to watch.

AUSTIN TRUNICK

The *John Wick* films are clever enough to realize that an action movie's setup and plot are secondary to, well, the action. It doesn't matter as much how we get to these places, so long as we do. By going against expectations, they're able to thumb their nose at the tired, old action tropes while leaning into the ones that matter most for the story they're telling, visually and thematically.

HARVEY O'BRIEN

I do wonder if it reinvents them so much as it just does them well. I think it does a lot of things that had been done before, but does them with a nice neon sheen that makes it both modern and retro. We talked about Cannon and the formula. In a lot of ways, these films are no different than Cannon programmers running the playbook, but exceptionally well. I don't really think the tropes are reinvented so much as played with a little—the dog—and much of it is revisiting rather than revising. Again, I like them, so in saying this, I'm in no way saying the films aren't worthwhile or worth discussing in more detail. I just would personally see them as part of a longer chain of influence and not so left of field as something I would think of as "reinventing." What would I think of in that way? Good question, and I don't know. Has any action film in the past twenty years really reinvented anything? Hmmm. I don't know. I think that the growth of CGI/algorithmic cinema is a kind of reinvention, but a somewhat cynical one, so deterministic as to ultimately undermine the very idea of reinvention. The MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe] defies the potential for creativity; it locks down the model of genre production so that there are no rough edges,

no unexpected eddies, no unanticipated outcomes, and the result hasn't been good for innovation, really.

MARK DACASCOS
(actor, "Zero," *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum*)

I feel that the *John Wick* films have raised the bar in action, because you have so many different types of action, from gun fu to "book fu" to "horse fu." And you have these incredible locations. Chad brings you into this world that, although we know it's lethal and very dangerous, it's still glamorous and sexy and classy at the same time with the costumes and the languages and the different cultures. He's a very established, talented martial artist himself. Between his stunt career, coordinating, choreographing, and then his own martial arts studies. He's very versed in the arts, and that transcended into his directing, because as a true martial artist, I feel one must always keep the humility and keep the open heart and open mind with a hard body and lots of training. I feel like Chad has retained that as a director; he's kept that martial arts sensibility, and he's humble. He's open to learning, but he knows what he knows and what he doesn't, so he'll learn and collaborate.

GLEN OLIVER

My personal belief is that the appeal—and success—of the obfuscated antihero is that we often "go there" with their psychology—we often watch them and say to ourselves, "I totally would've done the same thing!"—even though our everyday world and moral compass wouldn't necessarily permit it. Unencumbered by much context or backstory, the obfuscated antihero doesn't need to justify actions; they often just do reactively and circumstantially. My belief is that many of us secretly, or not so secretly, wish we could do the same. When there's weight of definition and consideration of background, acting in a moral/practical vacuum is much, much harder to get away with.

CHAD STAHELSKI

We went out purposely on the first *John Wick* to try and create a mythological world. That's why you see the colors, the extreme wardrobe, the extreme language. We just want to make sure everyone knows that it is

more or less a fantasy. We want it to be a fun ride with the action and the humor. That's why we keep hitting John Wick with cars. He seems to have a problem with cars and windows and stairs. We were trying to create a hero. Yes, he does do things with the gun, he does have an affinity for the head shot, for sure. Again, we try to stay away from grounding it too much to give it that emotional content of actual violence. We prefer to think of it more as a video game line. So it's a little bit more of a fun adventure with wish fulfillment.

HEIDI MONEYMAKER

The other part of all of this is Chad. He's one of the hardest-working, most dedicated people I've ever seen. He's constantly thinking and working all the time. Whether he's on a job or off, the wheels are always turning. He's always doing research and studying, and I think he brings a lot to these films. Number one, he's always striving for more and for better and for a bigger payoff. So he's always looking to make the combination of everything even more exciting. But something he brought to the world is John Wick as the antihero. It's kind of like Deadpool, where it's not the best guy in the world. He's an assassin, he murders people. It's one of those things where usually your heroes are saving babies and not shooting people, whereas John Wick lives by a code, but he's also an assassin. He will kill somebody if he needs to kill them, and he's kind of a bad guy, but we still empathize with him. We see something of ourselves in him, we root for him. Right there, Chad—and whoever else has been involved in creating these characters—has found a way to make us root for the bad guy. It's not your basic hero story. You almost feel bad that you're rooting for him, but you love him. And you know what? Those guys killed a puppy!

AUSTIN TRUNICK

The genius of doing something like making it a quest to avenge his dog is that it's also way, way, way more memorable than had they given John Wick one of the same old sob stories audiences had seen in so many other revenge films over prior decades. It can be tough to remember which woman whose death spurred any particular one of Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* rampages, but you damn well don't forget John Wick's adorable dog.

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PREVIOUS BOOKS FROM THE AUTHORS

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The Complete, Uncensored, Unauthorized Oral History of Star Trek: *The First 25 Years*

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