

★ Clint Eastwood, Back on the Side of the Law



Clint Eastwood on the set of "In the Line of Fire," the first big-budget film to have the full support of the Secret Service.

Bruce McGrohm/Columbia Pictures for The New York Times

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

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HOLLYWOOD, Dec. 6 — The hotel ballroom in downtown Los Angeles explodes with applause as hundreds of couples in fancy outfits welcome the arrival of a fictional President of the United States. The reporters at the scene (who seem uncharacteristically neat and well-dressed) and the television crews start to move in. Watching the audience with darting eyes are a handful of men and women

with receivers in their ears and transmitters on their lapels.

"These Secret Service people are a different breed," said Clint Eastwood, the star of "In the Line of Fire," which is the first major film to have the total cooperation of the normally reclusive agency.

"They all know each other, they all know each other's histories and there's this psychology, this unusual psychology, of knowing that it's their job to take a bullet and die in the line of duty to protect the person they're guarding," Mr. Eastwood said. "No

other law-enforcement agency is quite like that."

What makes the new film unusual is not only the Secret Service's support of the big-budget movie, but also the way the movie seeks to replicate reality. During the recent Presidential campaign, crews from the film, with the approval of the Republicans and the Democrats, followed President Bush and Gov. Bill Clinton at rallies in Atlanta, Denver, Detroit and other cities. These crowd scenes will be shown in the film.

Beyond this, Mr. Eastwood and the

creators of the movie say it will seek to explore the often insular, sometimes difficult, if unknown, lives of people in the Secret Service.

The first major trauma of the Secret Service's history — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy — shattered the lives of several Secret Service agents, who quit the agency or turned alcoholic or remained emotionally scarred. At least one agent relives, to this day, how he could have fallen on President Ken-

Continued on Page B2

Clint Eastwood, as an Agent Protecting a President

Continued From Page B1

nedy and saved him if he had arrived a second or two earlier, said Mr. Eastwood. In fact, Mr. Eastwood plays the role of one such agent, overwhelmed by guilt, who was with President Kennedy in Dallas. Asked the other day during a lunch break what appealed to him about the agent, Mr. Eastwood said with a smile, "Just another one of my flawed characters."

The film's stars include John Malkovich, as a Presidential assassin who develops a taunting telephone relationship with the Eastwood character, and Rene Russo, as an agent. Its director is Wolfgang Petersen, whose most famous film is "Das Boot," the 1981 German movie about a U-boat in World War II. The film's author, Jeff Maguire, is a relative newcomer who has worked on such films as "Victory."

The film is being produced by Castle Rock Entertainment and is to be released in the late summer. The film makers are now completing a final scene, in which the Malkovich character seeks to assassinate the President during a fund-raising dinner for wealthy contributors at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

Watching the scene, Bob Snow, who retired in April as assistant director of the Secret Service after 31 years and who is an adviser on the film, said: "This is the first script about the Secret Service that, we felt, was accurate. Before this, the scripts were less than complimentary: the Secret Service people as goons. This is not a documentary; it takes literary license, but it does portray with honesty the concerns and problems and difficulties of protecting people."

(There have been a handful of films and television shows about the Secret Service, including "To Live and Die in L.A.," in 1985, about counterfeiters, and a recent television series. The new film "Bodyguard" stars Kevin Costner as a Secret Service agent who left the agency out of guilt because he was at his mother's funeral instead of protecting President Ronald Reagan during the 1981 assassination attempt. The film, which was poorly reviewed, also stars Whitney Houston, as a singer under threat.)

Directing a 'Legend'

Bouncing around the set, Mr. Petersen, the director, acknowledged that he was a bit dazzled by Mr. Eastwood. "For a German director to work with an American legend: that is something," said Mr. Peterson. "He has done it all, he has seen it all but there's no star behavior. He's precise. He works hard. He doesn't interfere. It would be intimidating, I must say, if he said, 'Let's do it this way,' or, 'Let's put the camera here.' But he doesn't. He enjoys being an actor."

Mr. Eastwood, who directed and starred in his highly successful last film, "Unforgiven," which is almost certain to be nominated for Academy Awards, admits that he has to catch himself, at times, from also stepping into the role of director.

"It's happened a couple of times here," he said, seated at a table with the cast and crew and eating a formidable lunch of pasta, tuna steak and

corn bread. "I think to myself, 'Why is Wolfgang doing this?' And then I catch myself and say: 'This may not be the way I would do it, but his way may be a better way. You have to have faith and trust.'"

Mr. Eastwood said he researched the film, talking to agents and watching them in action. "I've known some of the guys who worked in the Gerald Ford detail; Ford used to come to Carmel to play golf," he said of the town where he lives in California. "Because I played law-enforcement officers, the Secret Service people were always enthusiastic about hanging out. They gave me a lot of pointers."

'Would You Take the Fall?'

It is the psychology of the agents that fascinates the star, and seems to dominate the movie. "You have to take the bullet for whomever you're guarding and it may not be the President," observed Mr. Eastwood. "It could be any dignitary. Would you take the fall? My character even says that he was assigned to cover Fidel Castro, who was considered the enemy. What would you do?"

The screenplay about the Secret Service, which is costing a hefty \$40 million, partly because of the use of thousands of extras and big crowd scenes in Washington and Los Angeles, has been knocking around Hollywood for more than a decade. At certain points, Robert Redford, Sean Connery, Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty expressed interest and then dropped out.

Its 43-year-old producer, Jeff Apple, began shaping the movie after watching the assassination attempt against President Reagan on television.

"I began doing research and the more I looked, the less I found," said Mr. Apple, who has owned a television commercial-production company and made several youth films. "The dimensions of this arena have never really been explored."

Guilt and a Game

After spending several years, off and on, with the Secret Service, Mr. Apple won the agents' cooperation. The casting of Mr. Eastwood — macho, taciturn and usually heroic — left the agency flattered.

Mr. Eastwood, walking to the set, said the guilt, complexity and vulnerability of the Secret Service agent in the film appealed to him. "There's the cat-and-mouse game with the Malkovich character, but there's also the guilt I feel about the assassination," said Mr. Eastwood. "My character keeps thinking, 'If only I had done this, the assassination wouldn't have happened.' It's the kind of thing people go through in life on other issues, but if a guy is assigned to protect the President — and the President is killed — it's something else."

"You know it's always appealing to play a character that has to overcome himself as well as an obstacle. It makes the drama so much deeper."

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