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'In the Line of Fire'



Rene Russo and Clint Eastwood are Secret Service aces under stress in 'In the Line of Fire'

Eastwood Unforgiven As Secret Serviceman

BY PAUL FREEMAN

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CLINT EASTWOOD recently went through an important period in his career. Between last October and January the Hollywood film maker and actor was being honored for "Unforgiven."

Instead of basking in the long overdue glow, Eastwood was working intensely, giving the performance of his life in the scintillating thriller "In the Line of Fire."

"In the Line of Fire" opens Friday at the Kabuki and Plaza theaters.

He plays Frank Horrigan, a maverick Secret Service agent whose commitment to his job has turned him into a loner. Racked with guilt, Horrigan cannot escape the doubts surrounding his failure to prevent the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Horrigan, however, gets his opportunity for redemption when he encounters a brilliant psychopath (Mitch Leary, played by John Malkovich) who plans to kill the president.

Eastwood says the Secret Service always has fascinated him. "That's because it's an organization that shuns publicity. I'm intrigued by what it would take to throw yourself in front of somebody, take a bullet for somebody,

somebody you might not even particularly respect. You just do it because it's your job. That mentality is hard to understand, but admirable."

He has known many Secret Service agents over the years. "I've spoken with them while I was playing golf with Gerald Ford or visiting the White House. But I learned much more in preparing for this. They allowed me to watch training film. I spoke with guys who'd been on duty during the Kennedy assassination or attempts on other presidents."

"In the Line of Fire" is the first film to receive the approval and cooperation of the Secret Service. Eastwood's participation could have been a significant factor.

The film portrays the service in a favorable light, but shows a few warts. "I like flaws in a character," Eastwood declares, "because that makes them human. No human being is picture perfect, although they're often depicted that way on the screen."

Eastwood portrayed complex characters earlier in his career, as in "The Beguiled" and "Tightrope," but Horrigan gives him an opportunity to display a wide range — tough and tender, humorous and poignant.

Co-star Rene Russo ("Lethal Weapon 3"), who plays a female agent, asserts, "Clint Eastwood fans are going to be surprised by this film, because he's so vulnerable and so romantic in it."

Wolfgang Petersen ("Das Boot"), who directed "In the Line of Fire," recognized early that this would be a breakthrough for Eastwood. "I didn't study his previous films, which is what I would usually do, because I wanted to take a fresh approach with Clint as a personality."

In a moment that may fascinate many audiences, Eastwood's Horrigan, recalling the horror of that November day in Dallas, winds up in tears. "You've never seen a scene like that in an Eastwood movie," Petersen proclaimed. "He made the scene work, but I can take a bit of credit. On the second take, I told Rene, who was standing by him through his speech, 'Next time, grab his hand, squeeze it.'"

"Sometimes that sort of thing pushes you over the brink. Clint, not expecting it, was overwhelmed. Afterwards, he walked away from the camera and just stood in the back, recovering."

Eastwood downplays the historical impact of the scene. "I don't think that's the first time I've ever cried on screen. I think I did in 'The Outlaw Josey Wales.' Crying is not necessarily acting. Most actors can do that without much trouble. It's what you hold back, what you're trying to stifle, that builds up the inner energy in our art."

Petersen says that Eastwood, now an Oscar-winning director, never intruded with suggestions on the set. "He was the one who



John Malkovich as an assassin

had recommended me for this job, so he was comfortable. Being a director, he understands that it's the film maker's film, so why be difficult? This was probably the easiest time I've ever had with an actor."

Petersen sometimes demanded nearly 40 takes. Eastwood, who, as a director, rarely exceeds five, says, laughing, "Wolfgang is a very charming guy and he can con you, I mean talk you into doing as many takes as he needs."

"After directing for years, it was great fun to just do the acting, to have someone else take the brunt of the work. I could relax and concentrate on the role. This would have been a difficult one to direct, especially on the

heels of 'Unforgiven.' I still hadn't recovered from the pressure of putting that all together."

Helping to hold the dramatic web of "In The Line of Fire" together is the unnerving performance of Malkovich. "The film needed that to make it work," Eastwood says. "The greater the obstacle the antagonist presents, the greater the protagonist's accomplishment. John makes a very provocative antagonist."

Malkovich, whose next assignment, ironically, is to adapt and direct a Chicago stage production of "Libra," about Lee Harvey Oswald, has great respect for Eastwood.

"He's someone I've always admired enormously. He is, in some strange way, what everyone wishes their father was. He's the icon of American cinema, of America, period. He is America in terms of what we are and what we wish we were. After all, he said, 'Smith and Wesson and me.' He's made an indelible impression on our culture."

Ten years ago, Francis Ford Coppola approached Malkovich about starring in "Unforgiven." "It would have been a total failure. Who would want to see that? I wouldn't. It takes a certain presence. Acting shmacting. At the end, when you know the character is going to have to start shooting, it requires a kind of mythic figure, which Clint is."

Eastwood doesn't read too much into his recent Oscar success. "If you believe in astrology, maybe it was a case of the stars

being in the right alignment. When I was elected mayor of Carmel, I went to the staff the first day and said, 'We must take the work seriously, but never take ourselves seriously.' I've always had that attitude. It was given to me by my parents. It's sad when stars take themselves seriously, because it obviously means that they don't have enough on their minds to keep them occupied.

"I'm not in the recognition business. I make pictures to please

myself. As my character in 'White Hunter, Black Heart' said, 'You've got to forget anyone's going to see the film when you're making it.'"

At 63, the San Francisco-born Eastwood believes he is entering his prime. "I have the luxury of having lived more of life, having more experiences to draw from. You won't atrophy, physically or mentally, if you keep forging ahead, creating new hurdles for yourself." ■