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## Donald Sutherland Meets U2 Drummer Larry Mullen Jr. on ‘The Train’



Tribeca Enterprises

Larry Mullen Jr. and Donald Sutherland

What happens when a masterful veteran actor who has made over 160 films teams up with a rock star drummer making his first foray into acting?

It was anyone's guess, and a bit of a gamble. But Donald Sutherland and U2's Larry Mullen Jr. are still bathing in the afterglow of their unlikely friendship—on and off-screen—after an intensive 17-day shoot of “The Man on the Train”. Skillfully directed by Irish filmmaker, Mary McGuckian (“The Bridge of San Luis Rey”, “Best”), the film opens in limited release this week.

“It's such a different experience than playing on stage,” says Larry Mullen. “It's a lot more personal, but you don't take it personally. It's one of those

things that you imagine in your dreams, but when you actually find yourself on a set, it was essentially very scary, particularly if you're self-conscious. But the real surprise was that it was a liberating experience.”

“In the first scene that Larry and I did together, when he's teaching me to shoot a gun,” says Donald Sutherland, I would turn and say something to him, and he'd collapse into laughter, only because it was true, from the gut. And this was really his first experience in working viscerally.”

“By the end of the film, he was an actor,” Mr. Sutherland adds, then leans over confidently. “I remember one time in the early 40s, Sam Goldwyn assembled all the actors in the film we were making and said to us: ‘I have discovered the secret of acting. It is honesty. Once you learn to fake that, you're in!’”

Set in a Podunk town somewhere in North America, “The Man on the Train” is a beautifully shot remake of the French 2002 classic by Patrice Leconte (which starred Jean Rochfort and Gallic icon rocker Johnny Halliday) about the chance encounter and ensuing relationship between two men: an engagingly loquacious, lonely retired English professor (Sutherland) who shambles about his book-cluttered mansion, awaiting his upcoming heart surgery with self-mocking trepidation—and a laconic tough-guy gun-slinging mysterious stranger (Mullen) whose pensive penetrating gaze says it all.

When “the Man” steps out of a train with a blinding migraine and the notion that he's going to rob a bank, he walks into a pharmacy, where the Professor happens to be filling his prescription and impulsively offers the stranger one of his painkillers. Then, next thing you know, the Man is unpacking his pistols in the Professor's spare room as an invited houseguest. A dual fascination kicks in as both characters study each other, questioning what they may have missed

out on along the way.

Call it an odd mix of a buddy movie and a quietly existential romp with destiny. The dialogue is truffled with deliciously droll literary tidbits from Bukowski to e.e. Cummings that gleefully trip off the tongue of the Professor. “I added some of the literary quotes to the script along with stuff I had in my head as a kid”, says Mr. Sutherland with the same mischievous relish as the character he plays.

In counterpoint are the Man’s brooding silence and a haunting minimalist score composed by Larry Mullen Jr. and Simon Clime.

“Laying down the soundtrack and having to negotiate with film companies and distributors was actually as exciting to me as being on the set,” says Mr. Mullen, who is also one of the film’s producers.

Donald Sutherland’s sterling performance as an aging sophist with a quirky sense of humor was not unlike his own tendency “to spill things out without thinking”, he says. As if on cue, the actor fumbles in his pockets and pulls out a scrap of paper. “Impermanence is on our side,” the actor declares, beaming. “It’s a Buddhist quote that I just love.”

“These days, I play figures that are dying,” he quips. “They hire me to say, hello, have a heart attack and drop dead.”

For someone who “hits things for a living”, as Larry Mullen Jr. puts it, what were the biggest challenges in the transition from rock star to budding actor?

“I didn’t know what to expect, so I had no expectations,” the drummer says with a smile. “When I met Donald the first time, on set, I said to myself, well, this is obviously how it goes, that’s how these guys do it!”

“Donald did not mentor me in any way, nor he did not offer me tons of advice. He just stayed out of my way—which I thank him for—because I’m sure the instinct is to help a novice actor along.”

Working closely with director Mary McGuckian, Mr. Mullen Jr. spent three months preparing for the role, juggling what he called “his homework” with his strenuous world tour day job.

Though the silent stranger role didn’t involve much dialogue (“In the beginning I told Mary, ‘listen I’ll do a cameo, if you like’, he says), he now admits that the knack of learning the lines wasn’t all that obvious.

“To prepare, Larry went to work on a character building exercise workbook that are a holistic combination of processes much like I used for the improvisation films,” Ms. McGuckian explains. “It was important to me that he didn’t start to take acting classes or coaching.”

“We shot the film very quickly and under the radar in Orangeville, a little town in Canada,” the director says. “When I picked up Larry at the Toronto airport, he arrived on his own, with a just backpack and no staff or security.”

“My character is kind of morose for a good part of the film,” Mr. Mullen muses. “He’s caught up in his own personality—he’s Mr. Cool, as the Professor sees him—when all he is really doing is covering up the cracks. Under that coolness is very hot interior and it’s deeply uncomfortable.”

Mr. Mullen also admits that “the Man” mirrored a certain je-ne-sais-quoi about himself. “I’m not a violent person, but I’ve got a hard core streak and have a reputation about living dangerously,” he says with a grin.

And decidedly, he’d give acting another go, if approached by likes of the Coen Brothers, Quentin Tarentino, or Danny Boyle.

“Those 17 days on the shoot were the most laughs I’ve had in a long time—notwithstanding the hard work—living in a small apartment just with the missus, learning my lines, bringing home the baguette, ironing... I haven’t done that since I was 22 years of age, or maybe younger.”

He pauses, then strokes the invisible beard that he shaved off when he found himself still uttering lines from the film after he'd crossed back over to real life.

"I miss that guy sometimes, when I find myself in trouble," he says wistfully. "Like c'mon... where's the attitude?"

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