

Film Close-Up: Ridley Scott

by Joey_Berlin

British director Sir Ridley Scott is competing against himself this season at the box office, with something old and something new in theaters. In limited re-release is his definitive final cut of the highly influential 1982 science fiction landmark "Blade Runner," which the studio had once re-edited to Scott's displeasure.

RIDLEY SCOTT - Director Ridley Scott takes a shot on the set of 'American Gangster,' a film that tells the success story of a cult hero from the streets of Harlem. CNS Photo courtesy of David Lee. Scott's other new offering is "American Gangster." This thrilling crime epic recounts the rise and fall of real-life drug kingpin Frank Lucas, icily played by Denzel Washington. The Harlem heroin importer ruthlessly rose to the top of New York's underworld. Russell Crowe co-stars as a cop methodically building an airtight case against the drug lord.

Audiences have come to expect a certain visual panache from the 69-year-old Scott, and "American Gangster" does not disappoint. A graduate of London's Royal College of Art, Scott cut his teeth directing commercials. His resume includes films as varied as "Alien," "Thelma and Louise," "Matchstick Men" and "Black Hawk Down," plus his two previous films with Crowe, "Gladiator" and "A Good Year."

Scott will reunite with Crowe on his next two movies as well, "Body of Lies," a terrorism thriller, and the Robin Hood adventure "Nottingham."

Q: What is it about Russell Crowe that makes you want to keep working with him?

A: He's the best! I mean he and Denzel are probably, I'd better say, two of the best because I'd tick off everybody else.

Q: Did you notice a difference between directing Denzel and directing Russell in "American Gangster?"

A: Well it's similar, actually, because they're both very intelligent, very smart.

Q: Does one of them demand more direction?

A: No, they both demand the same. You get a lot of that out of the way in early discussion, simply very often just around a table, talking about it. It's always, "I can't say I like this. Wouldn't this be better if ...," or, "I'm not going deep enough here. I need a ramp to get into it." And I've got used to that with Russell now, in terms of what he needs as an actor for him to feel comfortable. I've got to address that, to make him fly at his best. It was new for me with Denzel. But I'd heard from Tony (Scott, Ridley's brother), who had worked with Denzel four times actually, who said, "Denzel is one of the best. But he's a method actor who absolutely gets into his role. So he'll be carrying that all the time. So you can't misconstrue grumpiness for anything other than that he's in the role."

Q: Having worked together with Russell so many times, are you able to nail scenes in fewer takes?

A: If he wants to go again, I go again. I know I've already got it, I'm usually Two-Take Charlie. But I say, "OK, you go again." So we do four takes.

Q: Russell has been known to have an unpredictable temperament. Do you get the volatility from him?

A: Yeah, we've had our hurricanes. But less now, it's funny. You know, he'll complain about things which are always for the right reasons, always for the script. But my process, he doesn't have any problem with that. He loves the fact that I move really fast, I know exactly what I'm going to do. Before I'm there, I've already preconceived what I want. That's going to bend, obviously, if one of them says, "Well, why would I do that?"

And I would give the reason why, or they give a reason why not, and I say OK. I avoid conflict. The thing is, I'm so visual that I can walk into a room having not prepped anything and know what to do in four minutes.

Q: How is it that you see things when you walk into a room, which other people do not?

A: I don't know. It's all to do with art, my original background in art school, seven years there. I painted very seriously for two years. You have a very small studio and you're all by yourself in a room with the smell of turpentine and oil paints and cigarettes every bloody morning. You're sitting there staring at the canvas, hating yourself for what you painted yesterday. So you scrape that all off - and this is when you're doing serious work, where you're agonizing over what the subject will be. And the tutor will come in with his pipe and say, "Hmm. What did you do that for?" And so you have this intellectual discussion about the painting. I hated it. So I transferred over to graphic design because I thought that would give me a target, and a bigger canvas, where I would probably get into advertising and maybe be a still photographer.

Q: As an artist do you look to stretch your boundaries, or perfect just one direction of your craft?

A: No, no, I always look to stretch the boundaries. Yeah. That's why I've done three comedies. I like doing comedy, though we got beaten up for "A Good Year." But I think it's a good comedy and Russell thinks it's good. And I keep getting told how good it is by actors, it drives me crazy. I was talking to a journalist about how much he enjoyed it. I said, "Did you write about it?" He said no and I said, "That's really annoying!"

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