

Film Close-Up: Christian Bale

by Joey_Berlin

Christian Bale's break between "Batman" movies is no vacation. For his new film "Rescue Dawn," Bale shed dozens of pounds, trudged barefoot through wild forests, ate worms and plucked leeches from his body, all to portray an escaped P.O.W. on the run. But the director, Werner Herzog, had made clear exactly what Bale was getting into, and the actor cheerfully accepted the challenge.

CHRISTIAN BALE - Christian Bale stars in the action/thriller 'Rescue Dawn.' CNS Photo courtesy of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc. Playing a real-life U.S. bomber pilot who was shot down over Laos in 1965, Bale is taken to a remote camp deep in the jungle in "Rescue Dawn." He breaks out, along with an imaginatively cast Steve Zahn, only to face miles of impenetrable jungle.

A 33-year-old native of Wales, Bale first found fame as a child actor in Steven Spielberg's "Empire of the Sun" and in his 20s he seemed to have found his true calling playing psychotic killers in films such as "American Psycho." But Bale is best-known for striking the perfect balance of brooding gravity and quirky charm as the Caped Crusader in "Batman Begins." He is currently filming the sequel for a summer 2008 release.

Q: "Rescue Dawn" is the second film (after "The Machinist") for which you lost a lot of weight. Is it important to you as an actor to go to that extreme? Why not just use some movie magic and makeup?

A: There is a great deal of makeup in "Rescue Dawn." It was only important in as much as it indicated the passage of time and gave some indication of the suffering he was going through. But they did do wonderful makeup on me. I really didn't lose a lot of weight. But there's a point at which it becomes purely obsession on the part of the actor and it's very difficult to see that, when you are obsessed. I know I did that with "The Machinist." So I was very aware that I did not want to have to do that again. The first time I did it, it was a test of my own willpower. Well, I tested myself enough. Enough of that. I had no desire to do that again.

Q: You convey tenderness and compassion in scenes with Steve Zahn, emotions that Hollywood actors do not portray with each other very often.

A: Well I think it's rare that people find themselves in those kinds of conditions. These are two men who probably have never had a closer relationship than they had in those days leaving the jungle, feeling like they were the only people left on earth, a feeling of hopelessness. They had each other to depend on, and that's the end of it. They had the camaraderie that can come through common suffering. And Steve is a fantastic actor and a great guy to have as a companion. He's also a very funny guy and we had a great time working together.

Q: Did having a sense of humor help you work with the famously eccentric director Werner Herzog?

A: With Werner, you've got the intensity and the passion that he brings and the mountains that he's climbing each and every day. And we were right there with him. But sometimes we just wanted to sit back and just laugh about the conditions that we were in. We were flying down rapids, getting chased by snakes, having lizards running over our feet all the time. It was fantastic! I loved the experience. I loved the dirt, and really being out there. But when there's a group of people thrown together like that, there are times when you either want to just jump somebody and strangle them or else this insane laughter takes hold and you just start finding everything hilarious. Steve and I would find that very often. We would often just be sitting there and kind of look at each other and just start crying with laughter. It was a great time.

Q: What is the attrition rate on a Herzog film? Of course, everyone goes into the project wanting to match his passion.

A: A lot of people couldn't. There was one day I woke up, I'm bleary eyed, I stumble out. It's about 5 o'clock in the morning. Werner's sitting on the steps. I sit down next to him, we start having a coffee.

"Well, Christian," he tells me, "half the crew just quit. They can't take it anymore. You know, it's too much. It's just too hardcore for them."

And we just kept filming. We filmed the rest of the movie with pretty much half a crew, the ones that were remaining, they were into it so they took on two, three jobs instead of just their one. All the drivers had quit so we got taxis and hopped on mopeds to get to work.

Q: What are your feelings about going back to film the next Batman movie?

A: I believe it'll be much easier. You know, this is the first time that I've reprised a role, and it's the third time that I've worked with director Chris Nolan. We're all very familiar with each other. There's none of the ice-breaking needed. We also know this time that we have the confidence of all the people behind us because we were untested before. Now we're tested. So it's going to be taking it a step further. And it's a superb script that Chris and his brother have written.

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