

Film Close-Up: Jude Law

by Joey_Berlin

London-born Jude Law has landed leading roles in several high-profile films over the past decade, but lately he seems to be playing the role of another famous Londoner. In the 2004 remake of "Alfie," Law played the character that Michael Caine portrayed in the 1966 original, a British playboy who gets stung by his own womanizing ways.

JUDE LAW - In the mystery thriller 'Sleuth,' Jude Law stars in the role Michael Caine played 35 years ago. CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Classic Pictures. Law steps into Caine's shoes once again in his new film, "Sleuth." The remake of the 1972 mystery thriller stars Law in the role Caine played 35 years ago. And Caine himself returns to play the film's other main character, a wealthy mystery writer (Laurence Olivier played him in the first film). The clever crime story pits the handsome, younger Law against the older and much richer Caine, in a crafty and risky game: The winner gets Caine's wife as the prize. Kenneth Branagh directed the new version, which was adapted for the screen by playwright Harold Pinter.

For his part, Law maintains that his career's recent convergence with Caine's is merely a coincidence - he does not have an obsession with or desire to be the new Michael Caine. And for now, there are no more Caine remakes on Law's list of upcoming films. Law, 34, will next appear in "My Blueberry Nights," the English-language debut of celebrated Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai.

Q: You not only co-star in "Sleuth," you are also a producer of the film. Why did you take on that additional role?

A: I've always been interested in developing material, for a good 10 years now. I've been involved behind the scenes in a couple of pieces I've done, and there are some that have not been completed. I always enjoyed the process of looking at storytelling, looking at what works out. Five years ago, "Sleuth" came up as a timeless, classical, simple, dramatic set-up with two men that fight over a woman that you never meet.

Q: What was the appeal of that particular story?

A: I think Shakespeare said that there are only about six stories, told and re-told from different points of view. And this was one of those ideas: men in conflict. "Sleuth" appealed to me for that reason, and having Harold Pinter write it! It was also an excuse for me to meet Harold Pinter, and to say that I'd had lunch with him once. By the end of the lunch, he'd agreed to do it. He said he'd been writing around this idea for 40 years.

Q: Once he agreed to write, how did the film come together logistically?

A: He wrote it for two and a half years, and we'd meet and I'd look at it. He's a genius, in my book, and this was the first screenplay he'd written in a dozen years. I just wanted to be there to feed the process, to nurture it. And it was that which attracted Michael Caine and Kenneth Branagh into the fold. To be honest, my motivation was simply bringing these people together. I was fortunate to observe them together.

Q: So how are the two film versions of "Sleuth" different?

A: I think Harold wanted to dip this script in acid. It's much more primal, bare bones. It's more atavistic, more about game playing than the original. It's about the game of life and of wits. I think the idea of stripping it down is there in Harold's few notes about the set. I think he wanted to be very techno-heavy with clean lines, symbolic of male advancements. But in its middle, the men are still just fighting like cave men. We just want to fight to win, and we'll use anything as a tool: our age, our wits and our sexuality. And we'll do anything to dominate.

Q: Pinter's language is also completely different.

A: Well, when we met he said, "I don't do plot. I do terse verse. That's what I do." I might suggest a nuance in a scene, but as an actor I don't know how much research there is to do with Pinter. There's so much

ambiguity around his dialogue. And for that to work you have to commit only to the line. Michael put it beautifully. It's like this: If the straight guy tries to be funny, then neither one will be funny. With Harold's dialogue, you've got to be the straight guy, and his dialogue will be funny, or menacing or intense. It's like playing an instrument. It has to sing, but you can't play too fast.

Q: So what was it like working with Michael Caine?

A: Joyous. You've got Harold Pinter, who writes some of the most brilliant dialogue in the English language, and Michael, who can make the most mundane line into an iconic statement. Then again, Michael and Harold went to school together, two years apart I think. But Michael can put an extraordinary spin on a line. He's also got 50 years of experience. It's great to watch.

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