

Death Proof - Quentin Tarantino interview

QUENTIN Tarantino talks about the making of **Death Proof**, his passion for exploitation movies and why Kurt Russell is perfect casting as Stuntman Mike.

He also talks about casting himself in the movie and creating the best car chase ever... without the help of any CGI effects!

When did you realise that two groups of girls were going to be the focus of *Death Proof*?

Quentin Tarantino: That was the first impetus to do it. For the last three or four years I've had a whole lot of different female friends – I have different clusters of female posses that I hang with. I've got male friends too, but the dynamic of a bunch of girls that hang out together has been more my reality for the last few years. I get to hear all the stuff they talk about and joke about, their camaraderie, and most of the girls in this movie are based on one person, or a combination of this person and that person. But I knew I wanted to follow these girls.

That's what I do – I'm a writer. I soak up this stuff and I've got to do something with it. Then I started thinking about the idea of doing something that, even though it's not a slasher film – because it doesn't have a slasher film structure – seemingly has a slasher film structure. So with that in mind, I was like: "Oh, you know? That's the perfect format to have a bunch of girls together and have them all hang out." Except they have a little better dialogue! [Laughs] But it just presented itself, this chance to introduce this group of girls. We're all hanging with them, and hanging with them... till something happens.

Had you been planning to make a more female-slanted story before *Death Proof*?

Quentin Tarantino: No. I'd wanted do a movie with groups of female characters but it hadn't really found a home yet. Then, when Robert Rodriguez told me he was doing *Planet Terror*, a zombie movie, it started me thinking. I'm always going on little genre kicks – all of a sudden I'll get on a spaghetti-western kick and start watching them all the time and I was just coming off of a slasher-flick kick, and I started revisiting all those again and having a really good time. So, when Robert brought up *Planet Terror*, I thought: "Oh man, I can do a slasher film – that'd be great."

But then the thing I like so much about slasher films are the things that make them limiting. They're all the same, and that's actually part of their charm. It's a perfect

genre for subtext. That's why you can do so much subtextual film criticism on them, because they follow the same pattern. And to f*** with the pattern too much is to f*** with the genre too much. I was like: "OK, that would then make this too self-reflexive." It would be too much of a reflex exercise to do that. So I thought: "How can I do it my way and get what I want out of it?"

Also, breaking off from the whole slasher film, I realised I'd never really done an exploitation movie before. Even though we spent a lot of time shooting it, I wanted to have that opportunity, as if I was doing this in 1977, on a 20-day schedule. It started reminding me of the kind of movies I could imagine I would have made back in the 70s, something like *The Candy Snatcher* (1973), an exploitation movie that has all these weird elements.

In hindsight, most exploitation films were actually very personal; they were made by directors who basically were given a checklist of things to include – nudity, violence, car chases – but then left alone by their producers...

Quentin Tarantino: Yeah. And *Death Proof* is following a slasher-film structure but there are so many f****d-up elements. But that's what makes these classic exploitation movies so great. Like *The Candy Snatchers* – some people saw it the week it came out, and maybe caught it in drive-ins or on the lower halves of grindhouse double bills, but it's not like that movie was talked about during the '80s, the way *Night Of The Living Dead* was. So people are finding it again now, literally years and years later. And there's something really there.

It's like *Macon County Line* (1974) – you don't know this movie from the very beginning, it just keeps unfolding. And in the case of some of the ones I really like, it keeps unfolding in a really f***d-up way. You're going: "Oh my God!" Now, there's something kinda cheesy about those movies too. I'm not going for that cheesy factor myself, in terms of the making of the movie, but one of the things I always loved about exploitation movies is that, even in the midst of all this whatever, you all of a sudden start caring about the characters. You care what happens to them and you get caught up in it, even in this silly movie. And all of a sudden it's not silly any more because you actually give a f*** about what happens to these people, and I love that. Especially when you're watching it with modern audiences.

In terms of casting *Death Proof*, did you get everyone you wanted?

Quentin Tarantino: I was over the moon when I got Kurt Russell – he was perfect for

me. But with the actresses, I didn't really offer it to anybody else. I wrote these characters that I felt really strongly about, and then it was just a big audition process – finding the right people to play 'em. Somebody asked Jordan Ladd, I think: "Oh, did you get the part because you're Cheryl Ladd's daughter and Alan Ladd's granddaughter, and you were in *Cabin Fever*?" And she was like: "No! I won that part! I was the best! And believe me, if I wasn't, somebody else would be standin' here!"

The role of Stuntman Mike was originally going to be played by Mickey Rourke. Did you have to rewrite it for Kurt?

Quentin Tarantino: I didn't rewrite it at all. I've been known to do that. When it didn't work out with Warren Beatty [in *Kill Bill*] I cast David Carradine, and little by little I kept rewriting it. We had a big long training period, so as I got to know him I kept making little tweaks here and there... It was about a year later before I got round to shooting all the Bill stuff, and it was different. But I haven't had that experience every single time I write a part with someone in mind and they didn't work out. My whole thing is not to go to the next guy – y'know, the one that's almost like the guy – because it gives me an opportunity to rethink my whole movie. Kurt Russell is perfect casting as Stuntman Mike but there's nothing different about it. It's perfect casting, it's just different from Mickey Rourke.

Why is it perfect casting?

Quentin Tarantino: There's a wonderful aspect that Kurt has that's fantastic, and it mirrors Stuntman Mike a lot. He's a working professional and he's been in this business for a long time. He's done all this episodic television – he did all those TV series, *The High Chaparrals* and the *Harry O's*. And he's worked with f****g everybody. Literally. So he knows the life that Stuntman Mike's had. He's even the same generational age and he knows some of the jumping-off points. Cameron Mitchell would have made a really good Stuntman Mike. So would William Smith, or Ralph Meeker back in his day. Kurt knew all those guys, he worked with them when he was a little kid. But also what's interesting is that he's known Stuntman Mikes, and there's one guy in particular he's basing it on. And it's nothing to do with wardrobe or tics. The stunt guys too, they've all known guys like Stuntman Mike: he never really actually did a whole lot, but just enough to have a career. To make Stuntman Mike real for me, I worked out his entire career. I actually worked out more about his background than I could ever show in the movie.

What was it like directing yourself as Warren, the bar owner in the Austin scenes?

Quentin Tarantino: Well, one of the things that was actually kinda funny was that, in the script, Warren is the kind of owner-operator, and so people'd go: "Hey Warren, gimme a drink..." And I'd pour a drink and give it to them. But when I got down to shooting the movie, I was like: "Hey, I gotta watch these scenes – I can't be in the back, making the drinks." We'd already cast this guy, Tim, who's actually the real bartender in the bar we were shooting in, to be in the background, but suddenly Tim's part started getting bigger and bigger and bigger... And what's funny about that is that it started mirroring what a real owner-operator is like when he works a shift. Y'know, he starts off making a couple of drinks, but at a certain point somebody else is doing all his work for him while he's busy drinking and flirting with the girls. I figured that was kinda perfect for Warren.

Were you daunted by attempting a car chase?

Quentin Tarantino: It was very exciting. My lawyer was on the set and he said: "You were 100 per cent right." He was referring to something I said a lot on *Kill Bill* – that the really good action directors are the real cinematic directors. I'm not saying that's the only kind of cinema there can ever be, but when it comes to movie magic and wizardry and really knowing how to put film together, those to me are the most cinematic guys. Whenever I deal myself into this, whether with fights, which I'd never done before *Kill Bill*, or car chases, that's me dealing myself into that. That's me doing my stab at it. But I'm not doing it to be "OK". I'm not doing it to be "pretty good". I wanted to make this one of the best, if not the best, car chases ever. That was a big anxiety. But we got to the end of it and I knew I had my chase.

The crash scene is very explicit and also perversely thrilling...

Quentin Tarantino: The whole idea of it is that you've got this total momentum going. Point one is to get really realistic about what happens to people in a crash – you kind of get ripped apart. So the thing is to set up this sequence where the two cars are going to hit each other. We know what's going to go on. After being in the dark throughout the whole movie, now we're actually ahead of the characters. The girls are oblivious until the second before it happens, but with the music I've got playing... I'm making the audience complicit in this crash. They want the crash to happen. It's exciting, the girls are driving, and the audience is waiting for it, and they're waiting for it, and... it's like a come shot when it happens. And the audience has to admit that they wanted it to crash. If, at the last second, the girls had braked and missed it, they would be pissed off. They'd be totally mad...

That's the thing: to get them complicit, get them wanting it and waiting for it. Then – BANG! – it happens, it's so much more horrible than you ever could have imagined. But... too late! You wanted it to happen. You willed it into being. You are complicit in it. Now take your medicine! And you should feel a little ashamed, feel a little bad, but feel like you came. Now light the cigarettes! We didn't pull any punches at all.

Did you use CG effects for that?

Quentin Tarantino: No. Again, that's one of those things that I've done the last couple of times, where I literally wrote shit and didn't have a clue how we were going to do it. But we figured it out. At first I was, like: "I'm not really down with this CGI shit, but this could be of use, that could be OK..." Because you can't do this with real people, you'd kill them. But everyone knows how much I hate that stuff, so we just tried to figure out how we could do it without using any CGI at all. And we did. We pulled off some really gnarly shit, and it was all on the day, in camera.

Do you think we've lost something from film now that we don't have traditional B-movies and backlot studios any more?

Quentin Tarantino: I actually think there's a big loss. I understand why things change, and I put the reason for them changing precisely on the price of a ticket. It was different when everything cost \$3, or \$3.50, or at the most \$5. You could pay to see a cheap Jaws rip-off and pay the same money to see A Star Is Born, no worries. But now you're talking about \$10, \$12, it doesn't make sense. However, there was something lost. Roger Corman always knew what was going to happen in that market two years before it happened. So when all of a sudden his movies weren't playing theatrically any more and they were just going straight to video – I was working in the video store at that time – it was like: "Oh man, this is the end. If he's doing it now, then that's just the way it's going to be."

Now, there were some good movies made during that transitional period, a couple, but when you didn't have the chance for theatrical exposure, something was lost. Not that these movies ever normally get good reviews but there was always that chance. There was the chance that Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times*, who would be reviewing it, could like it and you could get a good review. There was the chance that Linda Gross, of the *New York Times*, could like it, or maybe somebody at the *Village Voice*, and then your work could be known, and maybe you could go on from there. But when it goes straight to video, it's like that chance doesn't exist any more. I guess the ambitions went down...

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