

A black and white photograph of actor Liam Neeson. He is wearing a dark, heavy jacket and looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred, outdoor setting.

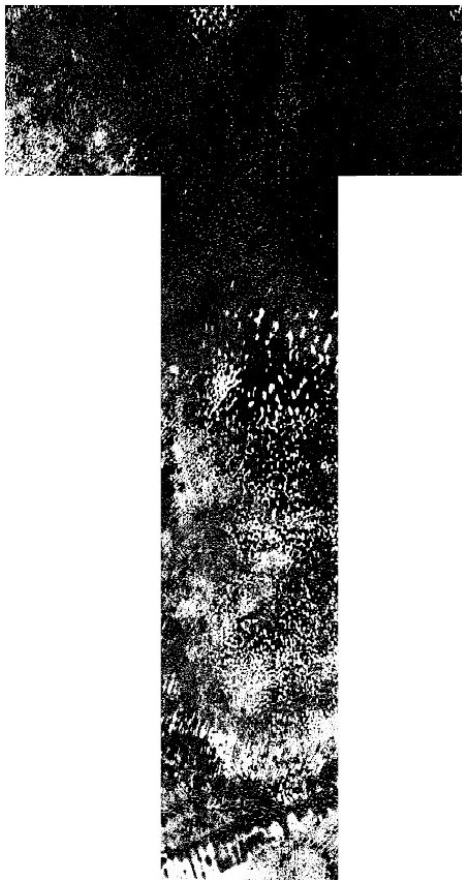
EXCLUSIVE
SET REPORT

GRAVE HEART

LIAM NEESON WANTED A ROLE TO TAKE HIM DEEPER THAN TAKEN. HE FOUND IT IN MATT SCUDDER: THE OLD-SCHOOL PRIVATE EYE BROUGHT BACK TO CINEMATIC LIFE BY SCOTT FRANK IN A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

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← SCROLL DOWN



here is a dead body in the basement. Liam Neeson, as private investigator Matt Scudder, creeps down a short flight of green, wooden steps into the dark, subterranean fair of a pair of serial killers who specialise in butchering their victims. Hollow-eyed, anxious, his hair wet from the rain that continues to pour, Scudder peers round at the bloody meat cleaver discarded in a nearby sink, then beats a retreat.

Thirty feet away, tucked in a corner of Stage 1 at Brooklyn's Greenpoint Studios, writer director Scott Frank perches on the edge of his chair, intently watching the scene unfold on a monitor. He leans in closer, face inches away from his twin screens. But when the take's over, Frank breaks into a smile, grabbing hold of the script supervisor's arm and allowing himself a brief moment of satisfaction before moving on to the next shot. "Wide master up to the strangling!" he calls out.

Who knew murder could be such fun?

While the first trailer seemed to position *A Walk Among The Tombstones* as yet another bout of post-*Taken* arse-kickery, Frank's adaptation of Lawrence Sanders' 1992 crime novel is much more an old-school private-eye thriller. "It's not a superhero movie," says

Frank, who co-wrote last summer's *The Wolverine* (as well as the acclaimed screenplays for *Out Of Sight* and *Get Shorty*). "This is [about] a very flawed man who doesn't have a particular skill set other than life experience. And he gets pretty beat up in this. It's a much more grown-up movie. It's a movie Don Siegel or Alan Pakula would have done in the '70s."

Which is to say one with complex, adult themes and flawed, morally ambiguous characters, much like the films of Sidney Lumet, too, whose influence -thematically and stylistically - looms large. "There was a rhythm to those movies, in that they took their time to establish character. And the people at the centre of the story, the quote/unquote heroes, were not all good or all bad; everybody lived in the grey area. They were all broken, flawed people and this movie, very much, is hued that way."



A recovering alcoholic and ex-New York City detective who quit the force after accidentally killing a young girl while under the influence, Neeson's Scudder fits squarely into that tradition of dark, often stoic, strangely charismatic protagonists, albeit a tad more vulnerable than most. "One of my idols, certainly as a teenager when I became a little bit more film savvy, was Bob Mitchum,"

Neeson tells Empire. "There's something about that screen persona I guess I wanted to emulate [with] this guy, a big presence that didn't have to invent funny moves or do things with his hands; just stand there and listen and speak in very, very simple prose. And that's what I tried to do. Tried to be still and emulate a Mitchum-esque thing."

BRIEFING

A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

RELEASED: September 19

DIRECTOR: Scott Frank

STARRING: Liam Neeson, Dan Stevens,
David Harbour, Adam David Thompson,
Astro, Ólafur Darri Ólafsson

BASED ON: The novel of the same title by
Lawrence Sanders, in which troubled
private eye Matt Scudder is hired by a drug
dealer to hunt down his wife's
murderers.

WAIT A MOMENT... ASTRO? Yes. He's a
Former XFactor USA contestant, here
making his movie debut as TJ, a street kid
who helps Scudder out.

Now working his 12 Steps, getting by as an unlicensed investigator "doing favours for friends", Scudder is offered a chance at redemption when he's hired by drug trafficker Kenny Kristo (Dan Stevens), whose wife has been kidnapped and murdered by a pair of killers (David Harbour and Adam David Thompson) who target criminals knowing they can't go to the cops. "There are two unexpected values people often overlook when they make thrillers. One is humour, the other is emotion. And Liam can do both," says Frank. "His face, naturally, has a kind of sadness embedded there, and a soulfulness that helps weight a character...He's not just a tough guy -he doesn't have to be tough, actually. He can speak very casually and there's that weight. His physical presence is also tremendous. He's six foot four, so when he walks into a room, he's already taking over."

NEESON WAS ALREADY a star when he said yes to three months in Paris and a "little thriller about a guy trying to find his daughter". A sleeper hit, *Taken* reinvented the then 55-year-old as an action hero and he capitalised on this late-career renaissance with an explosion of badass roles. *Tombstones* offered him a chance to flex a different (acting) muscle again, even if he was initially wary of some superficial similarities. "When I first read Scott's script, I hesitated. Because I thought, 'Here we go, here's another fucking telephone call, talking to the bad guys.' So there was a huge

question mark before taking it on."

What convinced him was Frank ("a lovely, solid man, a family man"), his pedigree as a writer ("very clever") and his '70s take on the material. "He outlined how he wanted to treat it, very noir-ish, allowing scenes to play out, rather than this MTV-editing craze [where] if a character speaks more than two sentences the editor's scared or the director's scared the audience will get bored." The framing is classical, with DP Mihai Malaimare Jr. (*The Master*) using '60s anamorphic lenses to effect the aesthetic Frank was after. "You think about Pakula's movies, Lumet's movies; they were shot by great cinematographers and were gorgeously lit, using light and dark and shadows for character and storytelling. The challenge is to make it feel contemporary and old-fashioned at the same time."

To further that end, Frank gave his cast homework: a list of '70s movies to study. "He told me to rewatch *Kluge*, *The Verdict*," says Neeson who "knew Sidney a little bit" and appropriated from the latter film Paul Newman's double-knuckle rap on the barroom counter for *Tombstones*' opening scene. "Because it's such a perfect, man-of-few-words gesture."



For Frank, Block's book represented a chance to reclaim the private eye genre from television which, he says, "had kind of taken it over and possibly killed it". In age-old noir tradition Scudder utilises shoe leather and nous to get his man (or, rather, men). And this being a period piece -the film takes place mostly in 1999 -that involves payphones and microfiche rather than mobiles and Google. "You have to work for it," Neeson laughs. "There's no rushing to computers and suddenly up comes the info that drives you on to the next scene."

Tombstones' journey to the big screen also dates back to the last millennium. After *Out Of Sight*, Frank approached Jersey Films with the idea of adapting Block 's series, starting with the tenth novel but folding in elements from *A Dance At The Slaughterhouse* and *The Sins Of The Fathers*. Universal came on board and Harrison Ford was cast as Scudder, with Joe Carnahan, hot off *Narc*, directing. When Ford bailed, the project collapsed.

"At the time, movies like this were not getting made," notes Frank. "Without him it didn't stand a chance. And there wasn't really anybody the right age that could help us get it made." Not then, at any rate. So Tombstones was mothballed, although Frank's script was often cited as one of Hollywood's great, unproduced screenplays. In 2012, Neeson signed on and it was resurrected with director D.J. Caruso. Then he, too, fell out and Frank (as with 2007's *The Lookout*, another film he'd written not expecting to direct) stepped in.

Not that this is the first Scudder novel adaptation. That was 1986's *8 Million Ways To Die*, directed by the late, great Hal Ashby, who relocated Jeff Bridges' Scudder from New York to Malibu. "It was a terrible movie," says Block, who is on set today, as he has been several times during the shoot, and has even filmed a cameo (although it will later be cut). "From everything I've heard, it was not a happy set, [but] it's also been evident one did not have to have written the book to dislike the movie." This time Block likes what he's seeing, although he's not read the script. "I'm willing to trust [Scott]... He has a real sense of story and sense of the characters, and I'm sure he's read the book more times than I have. Everything I've seen so far leads me to believe that confidence is warranted." Moreover, Neeson had been his pick as Scudder ever since he saw *Michael Collins*. "He told me that, which I took with a total pinch of salt," says Neeson. "I couldn't quite see that myself. But still, it was very flattering."



THE SHOOT HAS been a challenge. The budget isn't vast -less than \$25 million -and there's been snow, wind and rain to contend with, as well as weeks of nights, many in the freezing cold at Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery where, one time, filming was abandoned due to lightning. But as production edges towards its final stretch,

Frank is shooting inside the killers' kitchen and basement, built here at Greenpoint. Some scenes are straightforward. Others involve special effects and stunts, including a fight with Scudder that's a far cry from any Taken brawl. "We were very much at pains to undo the Bryan Mills stuff, be a bit more inept, just keep it real and short and ugly and not very, very professional, certainly not on my part," says Neeson. "Just scared, and you'll do anything to survive."

Most of the scenes involve one or other of the killers, Albert and Ray. Viewed on Frank's monitor (and in the final film), they're as sinister as hell, not least because they're so damn normal-looking. "Whereas Ray enjoys the game, I think Albert enjoys the actual process, the kill," says Thompson. "Albert's just a bug." Unlike most killers, they live together in weird domesticity. "They cook for each other. They take care of each other." "Are they a couple?" "They probably sleep in the same bedroom," muses Harbour. "My guess is once every three weeks they beat the crap out of each other and jerk off to release the tension ..."

"They're creepy motherfuckers. And the nicest guys," says Neeson. "I'd known David from seeing him on stage a bunch of times. But they did go to some dark fucking place." They weren't the only ones. Frank wanted all his actors to go there. "Everybody found themselves listening to some pretty weird music," recalls Dan Stevens (virtually unrecognisable as Downton Abbey's Matthew Crawley) who opted for "a lot of late '90s metal. Stuff like Pantera, Metallica, Silverchair, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mother Love Bone and Rage Against The Machine. It's quite an odd thing to be asked to do, but interesting and weirdly refreshing." Neeson, who's known his share of personal tragedy, says he didn't need a playlist "to go to dark places. I knew what was required and I can easily access that kind of darkness, you know."

When it came to editing, Frank was presented with a problem. His early director's cut wasn't playing the way he'd envisaged, so he screened it for "two of my oldest, toughest friends", Bourne writer Tony Gilroy, and Steven Soderbergh. "Steven said to me, 'You didn't cut the movie the way you shot it. You need to trust and stick with the rules you set for yourself,'" recalls Frank who, with Soderbergh's help, reshaped the film "like it was made in 1972 -which means not a lot of cutting." Out went 20 minutes, including Ruth Wilson as a cop and a subplot involving Scudder's son, played by Neeson's eldest, Micheal. "It didn't belong, it cluttered things up," insists Neeson. "If it came to a Matt

Scudder 2 and 3, which I would love to be able to do, then perhaps we could delve a bit more into his past."

And, with another 15 books and a character who ages in real time, there's plenty of material left to tap. "It all depends on how this one does, of course," says Neeson. "But I would be well up for it, and I know Scott would too."

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