

## Opening “THE BOOK OF ELI”: Part One

Written by Chris Haberman  
Saturday, 12 June 2010 07:30

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*Albuquerque, New Mexico...*

There are several of us huddled in the tiny press tent, trying not to let the sandstorm outside frighten us, when the machine gun goes off. For the past 20 minutes, there has been no sound from outside other than relentless wind blasting sharp sand waves across the desert terrain. Gary Oldman just opened our tent’s flap, silently snapped a picture of us, then disappeared so quickly that I almost didn’t see the smirk on his face.

Any number of people on the set might have tipped Oldman off about the photo op—“You gotta see it, Mr. Oldman—they’ve got the journalists wedged in that tent right over there, like a writer’s wasp nest. You can’t see their faces because they’re wearing sunglasses and studio-issued kerchiefs to keep the sand out of their noses and mouths, but the way they’re all huddled together...some look scared, some look miserable, but they *all* look funny as hell! That red-headed fella from FANGORIA looks like he’s afraid he’ll blow away right into the mountains!”

I’m still thinking about the way the journalists reacted to Oldman’s surprise appearance—some sat silently stunned while others made a cooing sound like children first laying eyes on a shopping-mall Santa Claus—when suddenly *POP! POP! POP!* The unexpected reports from a nearby automatic weapon are so blisteringly loud, and seem so close by, that each of us jerk and duck like panicked prairie dogs with no holes to escape to. And so it is to be while visiting the set of the Hughes Brothers’ futuristic action thriller *THE BOOK OF ELI* (arriving on DVD and Blu-ray June 15 from Warner Home Video), on day 40 of its shoot.



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Scripted by Gary Whitta, *THE BOOK OF ELI* stars Denzel Washington in the title role, a loner who is forced to fight his way across the desert after America has turned into a barren wasteland. It's the year 2043, and the only possible secret to survival for mankind lies within Eli's book, which he aggressively guards. He soon runs into the wicked Carnegie, played by Oldman, who wants whatever power resides in the pages of Eli's special tome. Eli teams up with a young woman named Solara (Mila Kunis)—who happens to be Carnegie's stepdaughter—and the two stick together even when under attack from Carnegie's group of thugs, which includes *PUNISHER: WAR ZONE*'s Ray Stevenson as the ruthless Redridge. Other interesting cast members include Jennifer Beals, Michael Gambon and singer Tom Waits.

The outdoor set centers on a badly bullet-shredded house, where Gambon's character George lives with his wife, Martha (Frances de la Tour). Littered around the perimeter of the modest and surely once-cozy house are all the hallmarks of a nasty showdown: a demolished Cadillac lies nearby, previously ruined by a claymore mine, and charred body parts—probably the driver's—lie strewn beside it. This scene will come toward the end of the film—Eli and Solara have stumbled upon George and Martha's house in the middle of nowhere. The elderly couple let Eli and Solara in, only to find themselves in a serious shootout with Carnegie and his crew, who have been following Eli to get their mitts on his treasured book.

Carnegie's gang arrives in four salvaged vehicles: a patchwork truck comprised of all several makes and models, a reinforced ice cream truck, the aforementioned Cadillac and an armored bank truck. The latter contains a nasty surprise inside: The back doors swing open, and a petite woman sporting a vicious snarl pops out with an enormous Gatling gun. Both she and the weapon are positioned on a small track on the floor inside, allowing them to slide right out toward the enemy while blasting round after round.

On one of the set's many small monitors, we're treated to footage shot yesterday, which reveals how the Cadillac was destroyed. Carnegie and co. are outside the house, demanding the book, which Eli tosses out a window. Only it's not *the* book, but a claymore mine in disguise. The explosive is quickly thrown aside before it can blow, unfortunately landing under the Caddy, which pops up into the sky like a champagne cork. As the driver's scorched parts rain down, the camera follows their gruesome landing, then glides quickly in and out of the house in a single take while the ensuing gun battle begins.

After a few rehearsals of the shootout, Fango witnesses the real deal, with stunts and blood squibs. The setpiece takes place in a single continuous shot: while Eli, Solara, George and

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Martha trade shots with Carnegie’s crew, the camera behaves like a survivalist voyeur, ducking and weaving within the house and peeking through broken windows and gaping bullet holes in the walls. The overcast desert sky creates a moody atmosphere that lends queasy realism to the furious confrontation.

No strangers to creating menacing atmosphere, the Hughes Brothers—twins Allen and Albert, whose last feature was the 2001 Jack the Ripper thriller FROM HELL—take time to discuss their decision to direct ELI while touring the sandblasted set. We’re standing close to the bank truck holding the surprise Gatling gun, which Allen informs is the “same one from [THE OUTLAW] JOSEY WALES, I believe.” The film’s premise seems simple enough to him: “It’s a man on a mission with something that everybody wants. It’s 30 years in the future—we allude to a nuclear conflict. It started as a war, then the whole system collapsed.”

His plot breakdown is cut short for us to watch a few rehearsals of the Gatling-gun attack. When asked about the gal manning the beastly weapon, Allen explains, “She’s a stuntwoman, and an actress as well. We wanted to hire a small person for this part. It’s like her whole life is about this gun—her job in life is to be connected to it.”



Albert takes a quick break to chat about the development of the project, being produced by Joel Silver’s Silver Pictures and Alcon Entertainment. “We put a book together with our visuals and our take on it before the script I even think hit the town,” he recalls. “I don’t even think Warner Bros. realized they had it. Then we pitched our take and they put us on it, and we [*blast of wind*] bunch of [*wind*] stuff with Warner Bros.—they wanted a certain [budget] number. We were being stupid and we were being honest, and we said, ‘We can’t do it.’ So it was on again, off again, and finally it was dead. And then Alcon came in, like last summer.”

There are definite echoes of classic Westerns in THE BOOK OF ELI’s scenario, but Albert

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notes that not everyone wants to encourage the comparison. “Yeah, that’s the thing that the studio has been scared of,” he reveals. “Warner Bros. is like, ‘*It’s not a Western, it’s not a Western, it’s not a Western.*’ And it’s not a Western, because although it is set in the West, it’s not in that time period. At the same time, my brother and I have always been influenced by Sergio Leone, and originally wanted to shoot this in Almeria, Spain, where they shot those spaghetti Westerns. We tip our hat a lot to those movies, but it’s not...we did the same thing in DEAD PRESIDENTS, and that’s not a Western.”

One source of inspiration that Albert has not brought up is the much-adored, tonally similar postapocalyptic saga CHILDREN OF MEN, which also features white-knuckle long shots. “That’s the one everybody was telling me about,” he says. “My brother’s like, ‘You should see that’. I won’t watch the movie for that reason; I want to watch it afterward. I just don’t want to be subconsciously influenced by that film. I am influenced by [other] movies, of course, but that one’s so close to this one that I just don’t want to see it until we’re finished—even though I hear it’s great.”

The chance to interview Oldman arrives, and it’s more like chatting with the world’s coolest college professor than speaking with one of the finest actors of our time. When Fango references Oldman’s penchant for spectacular villain voices (Dracula or TRUE ROMANCE’s Drexel, anyone?), and whether or not he has utilized any particular source(s) of inspiration for Carnegie’s enunciation, the actor’s charm takes center stage. “My ‘villain voices’? Well, what about my good voices?” Once laughter subsides, it’s back to the question and an unexpected game of Stump-the-Oldman. “The voice of Carnegie...yeah, there was someone, wasn’t there?” he muses, looking to a fellow standing nearby—perhaps his agent. After a long pause, Oldman reveals the source: “I think I settled on Daniel Day-Lewis from THERE WILL BE BLOOD.” More laughter. “There’s a timbre to the voice that I use... I had a few floating about. You get inspiration from the silliest places sometimes.”

Not so silly is Oldman’s opinion of ELI’s subject matter. “It’s quite topical; it’s quite timely,” he says. The film’s intensity hasn’t swayed the actor, and nor has the wild weather while shooting exteriors. “I believe we’ve had three days without wind. Not to this extent—this has got to be 50 miles per hour or something, and it’s the dustiest we’ve had. Yesterday was beautiful—not a breeze, blue skies, 70 degrees... I’d come here again to make another movie.”

Oldman’s turn as Carnegie should be fun for fans—the actor is wearing a trenchcoat, boots and a bloody bandage wrapped around his leg, and generally looks like the badass his character promises to be. And his ruthless attitude is expressed when Oldman says of Carnegie’s

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relationship with his estranged stepdaughter, “He’ll get another daughter. The thing that he wants, he wants—the girl, he could take or leave.”

Though Oldman is still happy to step hard onto the screen in rough roles, his method of choosing such parts has changed somewhat over the years. “As you get older, you have a different set of principles. You know, you’re 21 years old, you’re a young actor—you’re gonna go off to the outer regions of whatever...live in the jungle, live in a tent. I don’t wanna do that—I’m 50! I don’t want to do that anymore, I want to be able to go home. So I think: same movie, same director, shot in Romania? It would have been a different story. You’d probably be talking to a different Carnegie.”

*Coming soon: interviews with Denzel Washington, Mila Kunis and Ray Stevenson!*

{jcomments on}