

## Walter Hill's "BULLET" Ballet

Written by Michael Gingold  
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Veteran action director Walter Hill has been staging mayhem in Louisiana for several decades now. His debut at the helm, 1975's *HARD TIMES*, was shot in New Orleans; he ventured into the bayou for the 1981 action/horror hybrid *SOUTHERN COMFORT*; and went back to the Big Easy for 1989's *JOHNNY HANDSOME*. Now he's making the city's streets run red again with the Sylvester Stallone-starring revenge thriller *BULLET TO THE HEAD*, his first feature in 10 years, which he talks about in this exclusive Fango interview.

In *BULLET TO THE HEAD*, opening today from Warner Bros., Stallone plays James Bonomo, a hired killer who teams up with Washington D.C. cop Taylor Kwon (Sung Kang) to track down and take out the men responsible for killing their respective partners. Along the way, as the title suggests, many guns are fired and much blood is thus shed, though the highlight is a climactic ax battle between Bonomo and towering mercenary Keegan (the new *CONAN THE BARBARIAN*'s Jason Momoa). In a cinematic era when a lot of Hollywood action is CGI-slick, Hill is keeping the down-and-dirty spirit of '70s/'80s action alive...

**FANGORIA:** Was the opportunity to do a back-to-basics action film part of the appeal of *BULLET TO THE HEAD*?



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**WALTER HILL:** Yeah, it was. Sly sent the script [by Alessandro Camon] to me; he'd been part of it for about a year, and there was a previous director, but somehow it didn't work out. They wanted to get into production fairly quickly, so Sly and I met and talked about it. I thought it might work as kind of a homage to action films of the '70s and '80s. I didn't want to do a satire or anything, but I very much wanted to include some humor. I've always lived by this idea: You try to make a movie where the jokes are funny, but the bullets are real. That is to say, there's a bit of room for humor, as long as it comes out of the characters rather than jokes. The jeopardy has to really play to the audience; you can't have them not think that the heroes are truly in danger. So keeping with those rules, we set out to fashion it together, and I told him to get a haircut and that we were going to play things at a little calmer level than maybe some of his other films. He was very willing, and terrific about the whole thing.

**FANG:** When you work with an actor who has such a big personality as Stallone, or RED HEAT's Arnold Schwarzenegger or 48 HRS.' Eddie Murphy, how much do you tailor the script to that person, and how much do you get them to adapt to the role on paper?

**HILL:** I'm a great believer that you constantly tailor your script, as you make the film, to the personality of not just the stars, but all the actors. I believe the worst mistake directors can make is to ask actors to do what they can't do very well. They all have their comfort zones, just like directors—we're not any different—or journalists; you might not do so well with the cooking column or the sports column. We all have our areas, and so you're constantly fashioning the piece to match the talent. Now, you start out by casting people you think can handle the basic idea of the characters, but you always wind up messing with two or three percent of the thing, just trying to make it a little better.

**FANG:** Your films have generally been pretty hardcore in their violence. On this film or any others, have there been any discussions with the studio about how explicit to go, or about ratings concerns?

**HILL:** Oh, sure [*laughs*], there's always a discussion about it. You know, one tries to discipline oneself. I want to make, on the whole, tough action movies, but I don't want to drive people out of the theater. I think that most of the problems kind of begin and end with filmmakers being so familiar with their content that they become somewhat inured to what they've created on screen. The 150th time you look at something, it doesn't quite have the same power that a fresh audience has, and sometimes we tend to forget that. You're in there and you say, "Jesus Christ, the stuntman is off his mark or the focus is not quite right or the blood bag was a fraction

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of a second slow in going off," whatever. And you know, audiences don't see things that way. So sometimes you can mislead yourself about the power of your images, or the artificiality of them.

**FANG:** Despite the title, there are a few key scenes in *BULLET TO THE HEAD* where the characters really go at it *mano a mano* instead of using guns, particularly at the end, when Bonomo and Keegan choose to go at it with the axes instead.

**HILL:** That was tricky to pull off, because it defies the logic of the characters a bit. Keegan is committed and professional to an insufferable degree, and has standards, and he wouldn't challenge Bonomo to go *mano a mano* if he didn't totally believe he would be triumphant, without question. It's kind of a vanity thing. I think as long as you understand that, the way the characters are played, it then becomes plausible. It's also leavened with a couple of remarks that show that the film itself is aware of the implausibility.



**FANG:** How did Stallone take to performing all that rough stuff, given his age?

**HILL:** Well, Sly's not easy to talk about, because he tends to make you gush a bit, which is never in character for me. But he's the only 66-year-old actor I can think of who can still take his shirt off. He's physically very adept, though he has suffered the blows of an action career—he's got a bad back, and you have to make allowances for that—but he's a very brave, tough guy, and he likes to be physical. These action stars, they're all guys who like it. They enjoy going out there and getting physical. It's like football players; they like to knock each other down and see who's the best and who's really into it, and there's a kind of fun to have with that.

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But Sly is also a real actor. I think people forget that. He's become such a world personality, and has been a star for 35 years. He's lasted—that tells you a lot right there. And stars are rare. Acting is a skill, and to be a really good actor is a yet more refined skill, but to transcend into stardom, and to last at it, is a gift. Sly is one of those rare guys who can really pick up a movie and carry it. We were utterly dependent upon this guy, in this movie. He takes you from scene to scene to scene; he doesn't wear you out. It's hard. It's a rare quality.

**FANG:** It's a bit surprising that Stallone is one of the only tough-guy actors you hadn't worked with before now. Had you and he ever talked about collaborating before?

**HILL:** Yes, quite a few times. Sly and I have actually known each other a long time. I first met him in the mid-'70s; we have the same lawyer. So I'd see him once in a while; I sent him a number of scripts over the years, and he sent me scripts, and they didn't work out for one reason or another. It was almost always because of availability, and also, sometimes people see you in a different light than you see yourself, and actors don't want to do a script that's perfectly reasonable because they feel they'd be repeating themselves, or they feel it's just not them, or whatever. There are a lot of good reasons, and it's the same with directors. And I think Sly and I both kind of felt that if we were ever gonna do something together, maybe the time had come.

Now, I think there was some nervousness about it too. He's a strong actor, a strong personality; he's got a lot of opinions. He hasn't always gotten along with every director. I have my opinions, and I haven't always gotten along with every actor. But we got along great.

**FANG:** You came full circle with BULLET TO THE HEAD, in the sense that you staged the final action in the same location where you shot HARD TIMES.

**HILL:** Yes, I did. It was really not so much by design. I kept saying, "Now, we need a place like..." "There used to be this place..." "I remember we shot this scene..." Then we went over and saw it, and I said, "Yeah! This still works."

**FANG:** Was it kind of a special feeling coming back to that place after so many years?

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**HILL:** It was the first day. After that, there was so much to do, and I was thinking about the day's work rather than that. But when I first went in there and scouted it, and then the first day I shot there, I had—unlike me, usually—several waves of nostalgia. You know, what really kind of moves you is not so much the time that has passed, because it seems like a flash, really. It seems like it was five years ago rather than 40 years ago. It's the feeling you have about so many of the people you worked with in that circumstance, and are no longer with us. That's what really gets you—Charlie Bronson's gone, Jimmy Coburn's gone, [cinematographer] Phil Lathrop's gone. So many others—Strother Martin's gone. To various degrees, I was very attached to those people.

Also, your first movie is kind of a special part of you, and out of that film, I got a career. Not everybody gets asked back to the dance, and the truth is, I always liked that movie. You're not supposed to differentiate between your films, and directors don't tell the truth very often, but I quite like *HARD TIMES*, for various reasons. I always thought it came out better than it probably deserved to, given that I didn't know much about directing at the time. But I had a good cast, a good script, a wonderful cameraman, a wonderful film editor and a great producer, Larry Gordon. So I had a lot of help.