FROM HOLLYWOOD ACTION A-LISTER TO PRISON INMATE: JOHN McTIERNAN INVITED US TO HIS RANCH FOR A NO-HOLDS-BARRED, WORLD-EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW — HIS FIRST SINCE RELEASE.
Sunday night last year, at Yankton Federal Prison Camp in South Dakota, Hollywood director John McTiernan found himself in a spot of trouble. The man behind the legendary likes of Die Hard, Predator and The Hunt For Red October — whose movies have grossed more than $1.25 billion and launched three long-running blockbuster franchises — was wandering through Yankton’s arboretum, the penitentiary’s most scenic nook, which boasts a hundred years’ worth of carefully preserved trees. Clad in khaki prison uniform, his prison number 43029-112 stitched on, he was musing on the unfortunate circumstances that had resulted in him serving a year in a minimum-security government facility. Then the yelling began.

“Shoot!” yelled a guard from behind a wall. “I’m getting out of here!”

The guard marched right up to him, red-faced and eyeballing him furiously. “He was deciding how wounded his ego was,” says the director. “It was the closest I came to getting sent to solitary.”

Instead, the 63-year-old made it safely back to his cell, a dorm-sized room he shared with seven other men. None of them knew each other’s real identity; instead, they functioned on nicknames. There was South Side, an intimidating giant of a man. Cowboy, from the Midwest. Rock Star, an amateur musician. Kenny Rogers, who bore a startling resemblance to a certain Country star. And McTiernan himself?

“They settled on Mac Daddy.”

McTIERNAN’S ORDEAL BEGAN

Almost a decade ago, with a late-night phone call: Embroiled in the FBI’s sprawling investigation into LA private detective Anthony Pellicano, whom he’d hired to look into the production issues of his disastrous 2002 sci-fi, Rollerball. Jetlagged and slightly drunk, McTiernan answered one question with a, “Yep,” when he should have said, “No.” Two weeks later he was arrested for lying to an FBI agent.

And so began an expensive, seven-year-long, ultimately futile legal battle, which has been well documented online (not least by the fan-mounted Free John McTiernan campaign on Facebook — see sidebar overlay). It’s hard not to conclude that he was made a high-profile scapegoat of the Pellicano case, which at one point looked like it might bring down a host of Hollywood names. Aside from that one phone call, McTiernan has not been found guilty of criminal activity.

On Tuesday, February 25, he was released from Yankton and returned to his Wyoming ranch, where he has lived for decades. He’s been on house arrest, for his first lengthy interview in some time. The tiny town of Dayton (population: 757) is, for those who don’t mind polar temperatures, paradise on Earth. Situated below the front ridge of the Rockies and blanketed by snow throughout winter, it’s home to all manner of wildlife: mountain lions, bald eagles, elk, a lone moose that stalks the hills and once almost knocked Die Hard With A Vengeance producer Andrew Vajna off his motorbike. There are also rattlesnakes, though McTiernan — who introduces himself as “McT” — shrugs off the danger. “I stepped on one once. By the time he could have figured out how to bite me through my boot, I would have been able to go back to the house, get my gun, and shoot him to death.”

Despite these words, and the startlingly high number of taxidermy stores in the area, McTiernan is an animal lover who’s only hunted once. A suitable herd of ‘beefalo’ (cattle-bison hybrids), headed up by bulls Manny and Big Red, are penned up on the ranch, while Grendel, a giddy Beauceron puppy, is never far from his owner. “I’ve always named my dogs after monsters,” explains McTiernan, whose wit is desert-dry. “My last one was Beria, after Stalin’s lawyer.”

Inside, the scene is equally arcadian. His wife, Gail, is a sunny presence, having campaigned tirelessly for his release, she bustles about, delighted to have him back. His bright-eyed 11-year-old, Jack, plays with Grendel. The house itself is
charmingly cluttered, with stacks of books, scientific journals and a note-playing-poker painting on the wall. It feels a long way from Hollywood, though there is a new-yanked exercise bike in front of the big fire.

"I lost 40 lb as a guest of the government," McTiernan explains. "But it's coming back fast."

IF THE LAST ten years have been an emotional rollercoaster, his career has been equally mercurial, soaring to extraordinary heights before diving to spirit-crushing lows.

On paper, it was a peculiar match: the cerebral young director and the skull-collecting star. The shoot in Puerto Vallarta was beset by crises, including an uncooperative Mexican crew and a monkey (standing in for the Predators) that wouldn't swing on cue. Then there was volatile actor Sonny Landham, whom the insurance company famously sued with a tender to keep him out of trouble. "And still he did something crazy! We had to ship the poor bastard home," McTiernan chuckles. "He rappelled out of the top floor of the hotel, drunk out of his mind at three in the morning, back-naked with his underpants on his head. We went down five floors and swung into somebody's room. He wasn't trying to hurt anybody; he was just a loose cannon, and he mostly pointed it at himself."

But despite all the on-location to-do, the director came back to America with a sneakily subversive, technically sophisticated action film. Silver hastily signed him up for a third mega-hit for McTiernan; Predator; With Chris Kyle and Rebecca Romijn on the set of motion Roadhouse (2002).

A lacquered man who has always done his own buying on the ranch, McTiernan's distaste for LA is evident not just in Die Hard (the coke-and-Coke-loving Harry Ellis exudes studio-exec snobbery), but in his arty debut feature, 1986's Nomads. Starring a baby-faced Pierce Brosnan, who sports a wonky French accent throughout, it's the tale of an anthropologist being tormented by otherworldly street punks. The only movie with a McTiernan writing credit, it's a telling watch. "It was like a foreign country. So that story came out of my anxieties. But hey, what stories don't?"

He'd grown up mesmerised by the oeuvres of Fellini and Truffaut, once looping Day For Night for three straight days, ignoring the subtitled dialogue but studying the camerawork. And as he would do with so much of his work, he turned the film into a re-telling of A Midsummer Night's Dream with fewer fairies and more Twinkies, he remembers transforming the villains: "The original screenplay was a grim jungle-warfare picture called Predator."

On his following projects, McTiernan was to prove himself a cunning storyteller as well as a master craftsman. Besides compressing Die Hard's timeframe from three nights to one, imagining it as a re-telling of A Madsummer Night's Dream with fewer fairies and more Twinkies, he remembers transforming the villains: "The original screenplay was a grim terrorist movie. On my second week working on it, I said, 'Guys, there's just no part of terrorist that's fun. Robbers are fun bad guys. Let's make this a date movie. And they had the courage to do it.'"

Who are you? There are 11 of us — journalists, people working in movies and others — united by a common passion for John's films. He made them feel important and gave them a chance to pay, just for having that passion. We're re-inventing American genre, and entrusting projects to this peerless director. McTIERNAN CAMPAIGN ON WHY THEIR LOYALTY DIES HARD...
The shoot demanded backbone from him too. He (wisely) lost his nerve on the roof of the Fox Plaza on the night of the big helicopter stunt, calling off the chopper after one take for fear it might crash onto the actors below. But McTiernan stepped up during the filming of Hans Gruber’s death-drop (a shot he self-plagiarised from Nomads, though he denies that the fire-hose stunt was inspired by Sonny Landham), plummeting 75 feet onto an airbag to prove to a nervous Alan Rickman that it was safe. “I may be getting to an age now where I’m going to be excused from that sort of thing,” he says, “but when you’re 36 and you’re going to ask an actor to do a stunt, you better fucking go do it yourself first!”

ON A SHELF above the TV sits the new Blu-ray box set of the Die Hard quintology. It’s still in cellophane. Discussing the director’s work with him, it quickly emerges why: while he’s a Netflix user who follows House Of Cards and the BBC Sherlock, he’s not one for basking in his own glory. “I find all of my movies embarrassing,” he shrugs. “I’m not saying they’re bad, but I sit there groaning. ‘Cats I’m not happy with, parts where I fucked up, I find them emotionally difficult.’

It might not help that his career has been more embattled than most. The in-fighting that resulted in Last Action Hero is legendary, but even his hits were frequently tugs-of-war. For Red October (a shot he self-plagiarised from Nomads, though he denies that the fire-hose stunt was inspired by Sonny Landham), he’s not one for basking in his own glory. “I find all of my movies embarrassing,” he shrugs. “I’m not saying they’re bad, but I sit there groaning. ‘Cats I’m not happy with, parts where I fucked up, I find them emotionally difficult.’

A director always has a giant target on his back that ambitions junior executives shoot at,” he says. “One in ten of them are sociopaths. This guy had a theory that he was going to turn Red October into Top Gun. He was going to make it flashy and Top Gummy-like. Fortunately I was working for Frank Mancuso and Ned Taten, guys who weren’t going to get conned by some nonsense from a young tyro.”

That time he won. But after Last Action Hero (shot, McTiernan’s productions became increasingly tumultuous. Die Hard With A Vengeance might be his biggest box-office hit, but his preferred ending — in which Simon Gruber (a shot he self-plagiarised from Nomads, though he denies that the fire-hose stunt was inspired by Sonny Landham) kills a helicopter. On Viking epic The 13th Warrior, the director and writer-producer Michael Crichton (a shot he self-plagiarised from Nomads, though he denies that the fire-hose stunt was inspired by Sonny Landham) fell out so badly that at one point they were apparently of a legal system which gives many citizens sentences that are mistreated horribly by the US government, or Iain M. Banks’ Culture novels — and he’ll burst into an impassioned, exactly detailed 20-minute outburst. Though he says in theory he’d be up for doing another Die Hard film, or an Expendables movie, he hasn’t got time for another drudgery of a legal system which gives many citizens sentences that are mistreated horribly by the US government, or Iain M. Banks’ Culture novels — and he’ll burst into an impassioned, exactly detailed 20-minute outburst. Though he says in theory he’d be up for doing another Die Hard film, or an Expendables movie, he hasn’t got time for another dud.

DEA-versus-drug-lords actioner Red Squid, which is being reported as his comeback movie, has stalled because he views the current draft as “offensive.”

I had told him I was going to do in my very first meeting. I’d told him, ‘This isn’t about a robbery, and it’s not about the guy. It’s a love story, and it’s about the girl.’ I had to go and explain that to Pierce. And it says enormous things about how secure he is that he said, ‘Alright, let’s do it.’”

DURING HIS STAY at camp,” as McTiernan refers to Yanks, he interviewed more than 100 of his fellow inmates, including the colossal South Side, who turned out to be a lovely chap. He’s halfway through turning these conversations into a book, outlining the flaws of a legal system which gives many citizens sentences that are mistreated horribly by the US government, or Iain M. Banks’ Culture novels — and he’ll burst into an impassioned, exactly detailed 20-minute outburst. Though he says in theory he’d be up for doing another Die Hard film, or an Expendables movie, he hasn’t got time for another dud.

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As Empire heads out of town on the morning after the interview, we meet him one last time to say goodbye. He and his family are on their way to church, it’s a crisp, blue-skied Sunday and a lone eagle is drifting over the Rockies. Although McTiernan is not a morning person, today he has a twinkle in his eye. It turns out that overnight he’s dreamed up another gag for Thomas Crown 2.

“You know those big cranes which pick up logs?” says the action auteur, the man who showed Bruce Willis off a skyscraper, destroyed the New York subway system and unleashed Ol’ Painless. “I’ve had an idea about what one could do to a car full of thugs...”

“IT WROTE THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR 2 [IN PRISON]. HOPEFULLY I’LL MAKE IT.”

THE DIRECTOR // JOHN MCTIERNAN