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THE COLD WARRIOR

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

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN PORTRAITS AUSTIN HARGRAVE



John McTiernan, photographed exclusively for Empire at his ranch in Dayton, Wyoming, on March 22, 2014.

DIRECTOR // JOHN McTIERNAN



On the 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.

“There were 15 or 20 Spanish guys who’d gotten together and built a big dinner,” McTiernan recalls. “Cooking is one of the great arts and it’s a masculine one. For the Spanish guys it’s a hugely important thing. Anyway, suddenly this pork-fed lieutenant comes charging out with a couple of men and announces he’s busting this up as gang activity.”

McTiernan, a man accustomed to speaking his mind to studio heads and Sean Connery alike, couldn’t resist. He

muttered something sarcastic under his breath, to the effect of it not being routine gangster behaviour to say grace together before a meal. Except, the words came out a little too loud. 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, a figure straight from the pages of James Ellroy whose felonies included wiretapping and keeping hand

grenades in his office, the director was quizzed by a federal agent on his connections to Pellicano, whom he’d hired to look into the production issues of his disastrous 2002 sci-fi, *Jetlagged*. 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 overleaf). 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. It’s here that *Empire* visits him, at the tail end of a month of 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

• **Clockwise from left:** McTiernan turns Bruce Willis into a movie star in 1988’s *Die Hard*; Consulting Sam Neill and Sean Connery on the set of *The Hunt For Red October* (1990); More high-octane hijinx, this time with Arnie on 1993’s *Last Action Hero*; A change of pace with Pierce Brosnan and Rene Russo on the super-fun *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999); Dash Mihok and Samuel L. Jackson get back to *Basic* (2003).

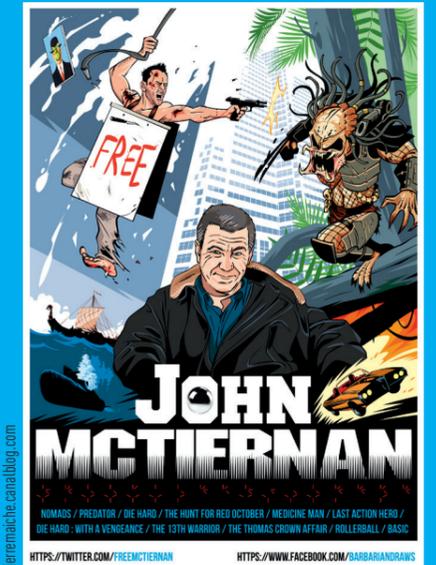
throughout winter, it’s home to all manner of wildlife: mountain lions, bald eagles, elk, a lone moose that stalks the hills and once almost knocked *Die Hard With A Vengeance* producer Andrew Vajna off his motorbike. There are also rattlesnakes, though McTiernan — who introduces himself as “McT” — shrugs 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 a shotgun and beat 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 sizeable 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

THE McTIERNFANS

THE FOLKS BEHIND THE FREE
McTIERNAN CAMPAIGN ON WHY
THEIR LOYALTY DIES HARD...



“IF YOU’RE GOING TO MAKE AN ACTOR DO A STUNT, DO IT YOURSELF FIRST!”

charmingly cluttered, with stacks of books, scientific journals and a mutts-playing-poker painting on the wall. It feels a long way from Hollywood, though there is a new-fangled exercise bike in front of the log 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. Like John McClane, the fictional flatfoot he made iconic, it all began with a flight from New York (his birthplace) to Los Angeles (where he’d enrolled at the American Film Institute). Instead of Hans Gruber, McTiernan was to face a different sort of besuited foe: his bank manager.

“It’s supposed to take two years to get through AFI,” he says, “but I was there for four because I had to keep taking time off to work. I’d shoot five rotten, cheapo local commercials in a week, then go and cut them by myself. They weren’t high-class, trust me. But it would support me and my wife for months.”

A laconic man who has always done his own haying 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 smarm), but in his arty debut feature, 1986’s *Nomads*. Starring a babyfaced 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 a simulacrum for how I felt when I got to this crazy place in the desert,” he admits. “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. *Nomads*, made on a budget that might not cover a whole shoestring, already showed evidence of his astonishing way with a lens. One footchase sequence in particular is bruisingly kinetic — “I was pretty brutal with the poor cameraman,” he allows. The movie played in Cannes and got the attention of Joel Silver, who was prepping an Arnold Schwarzenegger jungle-warfare picture called *Predator*.

• Clockwise from left: Creating his first action icon with Arnie on 1987’s *Predator*; With Chris Klein and Rebecca Romijn on the set of misfire *Rollerball* (2002); All smiles with buddy Bruce on 1995’s *Die Hard With A Vengeance* — a third mega-hit for the franchise.

On paper, it was a peculiar match: the cerebral young director and the skull-collecting star-beast. The shoot in Puerto Vallarta was beset by crises, including an uncooperative Mexican crew and a monkey (standing in for the *Predator*) that wouldn’t swing on cue. Then there was volatile actor Sonny Landham, whom the insurance company famously issued with a minder 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, buck-naked with his underpants on his head. He 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 *Die Hard*. This time he’d be given more creative control: “They let me run further.”

On his following projects, McTiernan was to prove himself a canny 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 Midsummer 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 terrorism 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 re-invented American genre films of the ’80s and ’90s, with his highly sophisticated framings, realistic characters and the musical fluidity of his editing. For film lovers, there is a before and after John McTiernan.

What are your thoughts on his prison sentence? Had he committed an irredeemable crime, we wouldn’t be supporting him. But being the only one [in the Pellicano case] to pay, just for having integrity of *Rollerball*, is a lot. No-one is above the law, but justice must be even-handed.

Which celebrities have joined your cause? Mark Millar and Brad Bird showed support very quickly. Then Samuel L. Jackson and Robert Davi came forward. Alec Baldwin was undoubtedly our most active supporter, and Jeremy Irons sent us a very angry message. We were surprised by the deafening silence coming from many other big names, as they wouldn’t be the stars they are today without John McTiernan.

How have you supported him? We put on two big events in France, as well as many other screenings of his movies in pristine prints. At all of them we talked about the case. Many people also sent John letters and gifts while he was in jail. We’re glad that the nightmare is starting to fade away for McT. Now that he’s free, we hope studios will come forward and entrust projects to this peerless director.

DIRECTOR // JOHN McTIERNAN



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Get the Empire iPad edition for more exclusive pictures from our McTiernan shoot.

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. Cuts 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.

When, after Die Hard, he was invited onto The Hunt For Red October, the screenplay began with Jack Ryan (Alec Baldwin) rowing down the Potomac at dawn, a cigar chomped between his teeth. McTiernan had other ideas. "It's Treasure Island. The story of a boy who has to go off and find the scariest man of the sea on Earth, who turns out to be a sweet old bastard. Once I had that, I had the movie." But after the film was shot, and McTiernan dispatched to Las Vegas to meet exhibitors, he recalls getting a call from his editor: a Paramount wonk was demanding it be completely recut.

"A director always has a giant target on his back that ambitious 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 Gun-like. Fortunately I was working for Frank Mancuso and Ned Tanen, guys who weren't going to get conned by some nonsense from a young tyro."

That time he won. But after Last Action Hero flopped, 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 (Jeremy Irons) and co. get blown up on a Gulfstream jet by their own bomb — was replaced by a weak coda in which Bruce Willis kills a helicopter. On Viking epic The 13th Warrior, the director and writer-producer Michael Crichton fell out so badly that at one point they were apparently shooting different endings on the same lot simultaneously. Crichton's cut was the one released, and we're unlikely to ever see McTiernan's. "There were enormous, destructive politics around that movie," he sighs. "But I'm not going to get involved in that conversation."

A headshake is all he'll offer on the uncharacteristically obnoxious Rollerball, leaving the mind boggling at what went

on behind the scenes there. But he does offer some justification for 2003's Basic, the slick but narratively problematic John Travolta thriller that is his final film to date.

"It was an absolute fucking nightmare. The week before shooting, I was told I was going to have to shoot the original draft of the screenplay, which didn't work. Furthermore, I was sent a lawyer's letter saying I couldn't tell this to the studio and would be sued if I tried to communicate it to them. I was able to squirrel away half-a-million dollars to do reshoots, but the story still makes no sense. No sense at all."

The one bright spot in the past 15 years of his filmography is The Thomas Crown Affair. Like Rollerball, it's a remake of a Norman Jewison film. Unlike Rollerball, it's an absolute delight, a caper movie with Pierce Brosnan at his most charming (and minus wonky French accent) as a gentleman thief being pursued by Rene Russo's insurance vixen.

"I probably had more fun making that movie than any other," says McTiernan, perking up. "Because I was working for good people, particularly Frank Mancuso, head of MGM at the time, who wrote me a wonderful note after the premiere. He said he'd found it a delight that everything he saw was what

far outweigh their crimes.

But that's not the only work Mac Daddy got done. He's been absent from our screens for the past 11 years, but now he's ready to return to moviemaking, with a vengeance.

There are myriad unrealised McTiernan projects, from a remake of Captain Blood starring Alec Baldwin to a Batman instalment, which he was offered in the mid-'90s. More recently, he developed Shrapnel for John Travolta and Nicolas Cage; as his legal battle intensified, it was taken over by Mark Steven Johnson and turned into the woeful Killing Season. Pre-prison, he poured his soul into a project called Crash Bandits: "A delightful story about two guys who make money by finding old crashed World War II planes in various end-of-the-way places. But it's dead now."

Instead, while under lock and key, his mind returned to his happiest professional experience. He took a pen and paper and began writing a sequel to The Thomas Crown Affair. Set in Europe, Thomas Crown And The Missing Lioness once again features a highbrow MacGuffin. "Nebuchadnezzar had two lion statues commissioned in 1100 BC: a male and a female," he says. "Alexander The Great took them when he conquered Persia. Marc Anthony had them taken to Rome. Constantine moved them to Constantinople. And at some point the lioness went missing. The movie is about what happens when it turns up at an auction. By the way, it's all bullshit; none of that ever happened. It's really a lot of fun and I hope I get the chance to make it."

McTiernan has survived things that would have crushed a lesser man. But a day spent in his company makes one thing clear: he still has fire in his belly. Get him started on a subject dear to his heart — like the Nez Perce tribe of Indians, who were mistreated horribly by the US government, or Iain M. Banks' Culture novels — and he'll burst into an impassioned, exactly detailed 20-minute oration. 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 Squad, which is being reported as his comeback movie, has stalled because he views the current draft as "offensive".

"I WROTE THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR 2 [IN PRISON]. HOPEFULLY I'LL MAKE IT."

I had told him I was going to do in our 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 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 Yankton, the director 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

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 threw 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..."

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