

Interview: John Michael McDonagh Takes Chances With ‘The Guard’

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CHICAGO – From a classic tradition of abrasive-but-lovable anti-heroes, the lead of writer/director John Michael McDonagh’s “The Guard,” Officer Boyle (Brendan Gleeson), is one of the most memorable leads of the year. Played with trademark wit by Gleeson, Boyle does drugs, sleeps with hookers, and simply doesn’t care what you think about him. When a major drug deal is set to go down in his minor city, Boyle gets involved with an American agent played by Don Cheadle and a very unusual buddy/action movie unfolds. Writer/director John Michael McDonagh sat down with us last week to talk about Gleeson, Cheadle, Walter Matthau, Terrence Malick, Ennio Morricone, “Game of Thrones,” and much more.

HollywoodChicago.com: The first natural question that people may have if they look you up on IMDB [and see that your last credit is 2003’s “Ned Kelly”] is why so long between movies?

JOHN MICHAEL MCDONAGH: In 2000 I made the short film. Obviously, after that, you want to make a feature film and then “Ned Kelly” took off. One, I kind of had a bad experience with that, and, two, it actually paid quite well. [Laughs.] So, I’ve kind of coasted on the money for a few years. And then once that money ran out I realized I needed to knuckle down and write the feature that was supposed to be from the short. At that point, I was still writing screenplays that I wasn’t planning to direct. After “Ned Kelly,” it pushed me to write films that...no one’s going to give me \$60 million but I could write something that’s like \$6 or \$7 million. Then I was on things that would get close to getting made and would then go away. An actor would get interested...it was one of those stop/start kind of things. There’s a script I really like that I want to do called “War & Everyone” that I may do next year in Alabama. It’s slightly bigger but it would probably be \$10-15 million.



The Guard

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: I read a lot about “Ned Kelly” and the disaster it was in your mind and a thought crossed my mind — If that had gone well...

MCDONAGH: I’d still just be writing screenplays.

HollywoodChicago.com: You wouldn’t be a director?



MCDONAGH: Possibly. I might have just stayed. Exactly. But the script this time was actually written for me to direct. When it went out to producers, it went out with that proviso. “War & Everyone” had an actor that would keep getting close and then disappear. Keep getting close and then disappear. So all my contempt for the film industry of Britain kind of came out in the character of Boyle. His disillusionment. You can have something you work to get made for years and then this — Brendan and Don [Cheadle] said ‘yes’ in a week. I also formed a film company called Reprisal Films. We all developed it that way. Brendan and Don — when it goes out, everyone’s reading it. You’re not at the bottom of the pile any more. I wrote the script Christmas ‘08 and we were in pre-production the following September. Same with “Ned Kelly.” Sometimes it goes finger-snap and other times you can plug away for three or four years. Now I’ll be writing scripts that I want to direct. And however successful “The Guard” is, I’m still not going to be given \$60 million for a script. Maybe three or four down the line...if I haven’t been made insane by the business.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you have ideas that require \$60-70 million?

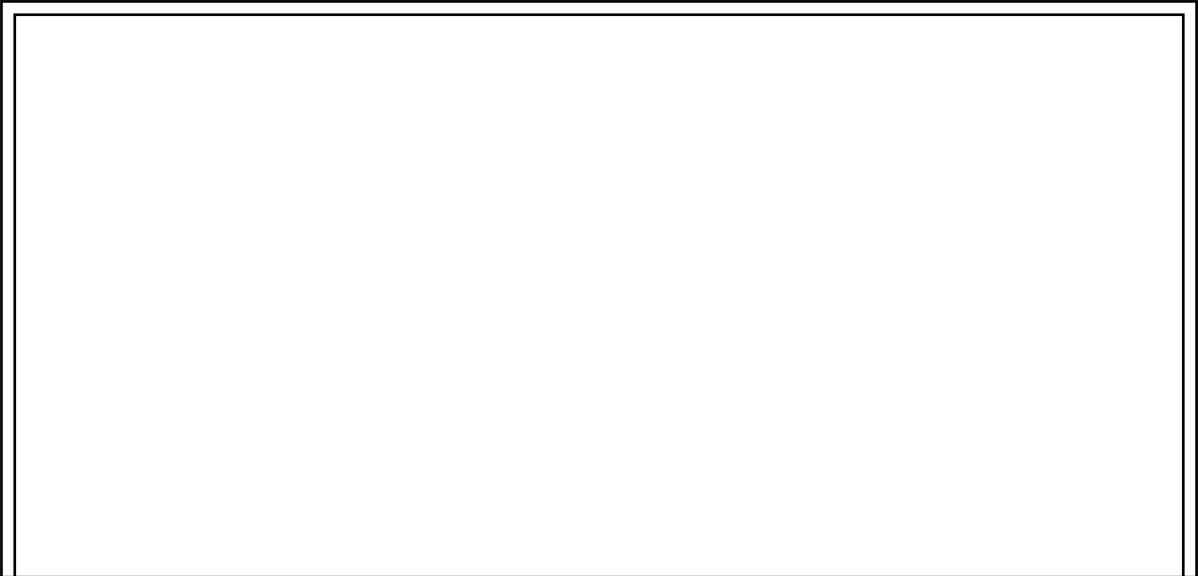
MCDONAGH: I’ve got this big thing called “Chaos Inc.” about a Buddhist private eye in Las Vegas. A group of terrorists start attacking various locations around Las Vegas in what we think is random but we come to realize has an underlying motive that has something to do with the private eye. That was one of these big budget films. It’s something that I might...you know, HBO and Showtime are doing these adventurous series. I might re-work it for a series. You don’t have problems with language, sex, or violence any more. Is Showtime exactly the same as HBO?

HollywoodChicago.com: Not quite. The adult parameters, definitely, but not as much in the way of creativity. They’re not going to take a risk like “Game of Thrones.” They’re a little safer.

MCDONAGH: A friend of mine is in “Game of Thrones” — Liam Cunningham [who is also in “The Guard”]. I haven’t had the chance to see it. Why is it so good?

HollywoodChicago.com: They allowed SO much creative freedom. They never cared if you couldn’t follow it. They didn’t dumb it down.

MCDONAGH: Right. Right. And they’ve got books to work from so they already have a whole world.





The Guard

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: They’re not trying to appeal to the lowest common denominator. HBO works because it doesn’t treat its audience like idiots. Let’s talk about parameters and language. Did you ever worry about making a lead character who might be considered unlikable?

MCDONAGH: I’m a big fan of all of those anti-heroes from ’70s movies. There’s a strange design to it as well — he’s got a rotary phone and you never see people on computers. The only time you see a cell phone is when Everett opens one. I hate that in movies — people on phones. You see whole episode of “The X-Files” conducted on the phone. And then those movies where they solve a crime by Googling something? Why bother making a film?

HollywoodChicago.com: There’s nothing thrilling about watching someone on a computer.

MCDONAGH: NO. The only thing recently that had good use of technology was “The Ghost Writer.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, Polanski.

MCDONAGH: Exactly. But, yeah, I was always a fan of those ’70s movies. And profanity comes up more in America. It didn’t really occur to me. Where I’m from in London, people are swearing all the time. Certain words that you can’t say at all — the c-word — is bandied about and doesn’t mean the same thing. People just say it as a routine sort of word. It doesn’t have the same weight. It wasn’t in my mind. I would be more likely to censor myself if I thought the jokes were too dumb or too slapsticky. I’d take that stuff out. I’d hold back on that. I was never too worried by his confrontational remarks on race.

HollywoodChicago.com: The Waco line.

MCDONAGH: That gets one of the biggest laughs.

HollywoodChicago.com: It does but it’s with a [winces a bit].

MCDONAGH: [Laughs.] Right. It does. The reason it gets a big laugh is because usually by that point the hero has learned something but it gets a big laugh because he’s still saying the same shit he did at the beginning.



The Guard

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you think it plays differently here overall?

MCDONAGH: In Ireland, a few specific jokes get laughs, but most of the same jokes get the same laughs. Here there's more of a slightly-shocked delay laugh but it plays the same. In America, when the audiences realize the kind of comedy it's going to be...I think they go in thinking it will be a "wryly amusing" buddy comedy and "wryly amusing" means you don't laugh at anything. But they realize that's not what it is and there's a shock and a release and these kind of confrontational jokes. If you don't walk out, then you go with it and the laughs start to get bigger in a way.

HollywoodChicago.com: It also certainly punches you in the face at the beginning with the N.E.R.D. song ["Rock Star," which opens with the words "F**king Poser!"].

MCDONAGH: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. That's a good example of serendipity in movie-making. We secured that song in the last two weeks and we'd run out of money and so the producers made me pay for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: It's worth it.

MCDONAGH: Yeah. Especially to open the film as well. I love cold opens.

HollywoodChicago.com: And how did Calexico get involved with the score?

MCDONAGH: That's as basic as me, drunk, in my kitchen, listening to "Feast of Wire" and thinking that it could be music for a film. You sober up and think they'll never do it but how do you know if you don't ask them? I wanted to say that the character thinks he's the hero of a Sergio Leone movie and I wanted the score to sound like Ennio Morricone. I was nervous about asking for that but they said that they loved Ennio Morricone. It was kind of a smooth process actually. And, obviously, John Denver at the end. It was kind of expensive, but it was worth it. Don didn't have a lot of notes but he wasn't sure about that one in his notes. But I wanted it. It has that melancholy edge like '70s movies.



The Guard

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: You talk a lot about '70s movies, were there specific ones in mind while you were making this?

MCDONAGH: I'm a big fan of "Charley Varrick," the Walter Matthau film. It's very good. What I love about it is the triumph of intelligence over brute force — that's in a lot of Matthau films. "Freebie & The Bean" I had percolating in mind and I've seen it since and realized it's kind of exactly what I want to do in Alabama [with "Cavalry," a movie McDonagh is making next with Gleeson]. Have you ever seen a film called "Wanda"? I like those obscure '70s movies.

HollywoodChicago.com: And I know you're a big Malick fan as well.

MCDONAGH: "Badlands" is my favorite film. "Badlands" and "Night of the Hunter."

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you like "Tree of Life"?

MCDONAGH: I did. It's one of those films in which I'd like to see the longer cut. I was blown away by most people by the cinematography. And the 20-minute sequence that was so controversial, I loved it.



The Guard

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: Has "The Guard" changed at all over its festival screening times?

MCDONAGH: No. After Sundance, Brendan came in and did a half a day of ADR. That's it. It's mostly in the opening 15-20 minutes when the audience is getting used to the accents.

HollywoodChicago.com: You mentioned notes. When you have actors of this caliber, how much input do you allow them into the process?

MCDONAGH: I was happy to get notes from Brendan and Don. When you work with actors you trust...sometimes you'll have a cut and there will be things that bug you a bit but then if they have a note about the same thing it can kind of push you. I have a tendency to be a bit lately but then someone else says something and it pushes me. Obviously, the problem you have sometimes is that you can get too many notes from too many people who weren't involved in the process. I like 6-7 specific notes. 20-30 notes is a scattershot approach.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you write it for either of them?

MCDONAGH: No. Once it was written, I couldn't see anyone else playing it but Brendan. With Don, I liked him in "Devil in a Blue Dress" and "Boogie Nights" and I saw him interviewed and thought he was a funny guy. He's got sort of a dark humor about him.

HollywoodChicago.com: How is it different than it would have been with someone other than Brendan?

MCDONAGH: Let's think about it. It would have probably been Colin [Farrell] or [Michael] Fassbender or maybe Cillian Murphy. A younger man — the character has to be at the end of his tether. If it's a younger person, you wouldn't have that sort of feeling and a lot of the edgy comedy could fall on the side of plain nastiness. Brendan has a warmth and sympathy about him. He doesn't believe what he's saying, he's just trying to undermine anyone who he thinks has power over him. A younger actor would just seem like a really nasty person. He's a character who doesn't care about anything.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which is something that's earned with age, right? Young people who don't care about anything are just pricks.

MCDONAGH: [Laughs.] Right.

HollywoodChicago.com: Any advice for upcoming screenwriters?

MCDONAGH: It sounds flippant but what I do is I try to write the exact opposite of most American movies made today. [Laughs.] You're writing what appears to be a police procedural or buddy cop movie — I think of all of those movies or "C.S.I." shows and what they would do in those scenes and write the opposite. I worked that way.

"The Guard" is now playing in some markets and opens in theaters in Chicago on August 5th, 2011.



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