

Interview: Martin McDonagh Introduces You to ‘Seven Psychopaths’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 10, 2012 - 2:22pm

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Christopher Walken](#) [3]
- [Colin Farrell](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [In Bruges](#) [6]
- [Interview](#) [7]
- [Martin McDonagh](#) [8]
- [Mean Streets](#) [9]
- [Night of the Hunter](#) [10]
- [Sam Peckinpah](#) [11]
- [Sam Rockwell](#) [12]
- [Seven Psychopaths](#) [13]
- [Tom Waits](#) [14]
- [Woody Harrelson](#) [15]

CHICAGO – Playwright Martin McDonagh really broke into the film world in a big way with his Oscar-nominated script for the stellar “In Bruges.” He defies the sophomore slump this week with the release of “Seven Psychopaths,” starring Colin Farrell, Sam Rockwell, Christopher Walken, Tom Waits, and Woody Harrelson. McDonagh recently sat down with us to talk about the themes in his work, extreme violence, how much Harry Dean Stanton rules, how he cribbed from “Night of the Hunter” & “Mean Streets,” and much more.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: As I’m getting older I’ve noticed myself thinking about some of the themes at play in “Seven Psychopaths” like Heaven and Hell and personal responsibility. Are these themes that are intriguing more now and that’s why you’re playing with them or have they always interested you?

MARTIN MCDONAGH: They’ve always been there but I put them more front and center now than I used to. I always used to write stories for the sake of storytelling whereas now I think about why you would write a story like that in the first place. Is it the best story to put out there? Is there another way of storytelling? Does every story have to end in violence or have the usual tropes of revenge or comeuppance? I don’t have an answer to it yet but it’s fun to explore in the context of a generic Hollywood movie.

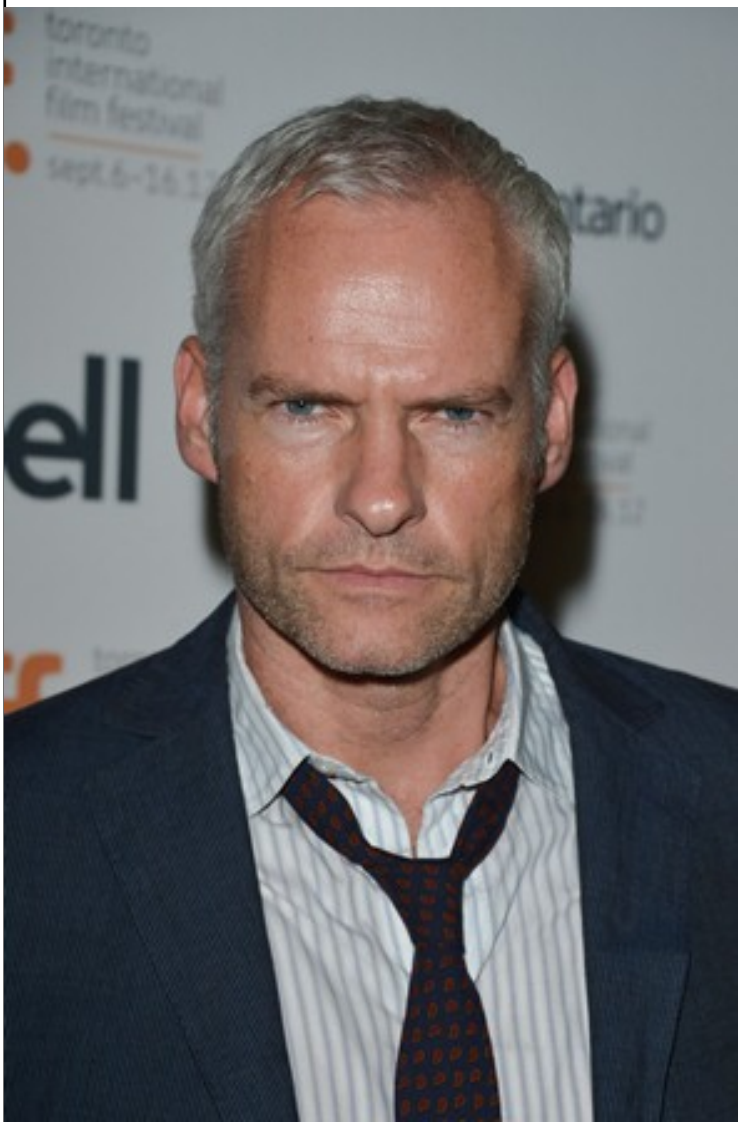


Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you start with theme or with plot?

MCDONAGH: I usually don’t start with anything at all. Definitely not theme. But the things I think about will bubble through anyway. I usually

set up a couple of characters and let them take me to the next scene. I had the “Quaker Psychopath” story written as a short story years before and so the tentacles of that story started to unfold and I didn’t realize that once I put it in that [REDACTED FOR SPOILERS].



Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Four or five of the characters mention Heaven and Hell. And vengeance is a major theme. Is vengeance is allowable in a world where you believe in Heaven and Hell?

MCDONAGH: Both this and “In Bruges,” which dealt specifically with Purgatory, I don’t think it’s as heavy...

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: No. But when those themes are coming to the surface, do you foster them or just continue to let the story grow organically?

MCDONAGH: Well, you said revenge. That is more front and center. Christopher’s character almost becomes the moral center of the film. Fundamentally, once I got a third of the way through I realized that that was going to come up more and more. And then when I got to the story that he tells, that’s the moral conclusion of the piece. I let it go to that place. That was an intention early on.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You also have a lead character who’s a writer who’s feeling pressure to follow up a major success. A little autobiographical?

MCDONAGH: Not so much. The alcohol. (Laughs.) Even calling the character by my name...

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You’re asking for it.

MCDONAGH: (Laughs.) Exactly. I asked for it. But I was lucky enough that I’ve never had to play the Hollywood game at all and I had this script written at the same time as “In Bruges.” So that aspect of it isn’t quite true. I didn’t worry about the sophomore slump. I mean, I didn’t want to fuck it up. The main pressure was that it was a good script that I didn’t want to fuck up. I didn’t want it to be a lot worse than “In Bruges.” (Laughs.) It’s very different. It’s hard for me at this stage to compare the two. “In Bruges” is sadder, darker, and heavier. This is more nuts.





Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Did you write it with anyone in mind?

MCDONAGH: Not really. I love Sam [Rockwell] so much that he does often bubble up when I’m writing that type. We almost did a play together a long time ago. I’ve known him about seven years. But it was mostly from being a fan. I did a play with Sam & Christopher about three years ago in New York. That really helped. And I knew Colin, of course. I think if we hadn’t done the play together, that trust may have not been there. I may have been too nervous early on but, by the end, I knew [Christopher] would do five takes and they’d all be different but they’d all be great.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How much actor input do you allow into dialogue or character on a script level?

MCDONAGH: We don’t really change lines at all. We rehearse. Sam would improv into a scene and then do the lines and then improv out of it. And some of that stuff appears in the film, I think. Pretty much, dialogue-wise, it’s as was on the page. Same with Christopher’s stuff even though it always sounds like he’s written the lines themselves, and the structure of them, and the lack of punctuation. I think sometimes he thinks, “What’s the way no one in the world would say this?”

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How did you choose your smaller roles? Michael Pitt, Michael Stuhlbarg, etc. There are such great little character actors throughout the piece.



Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

MCDONAGH: [SPOILERS REDACTED AGAIN]. I’d worked with Michael Stuhlbarg on a play a few years ago and Pitt I didn’t know but I loved. Harry Dean Stanton was like a dream. “Harry would be perfect for that in a DREAM world. Well, what if we sent it to him?” He says yes. And you just go wow. He’s probably been in more cult classics than anybody in the world. Harry smokes like a trooper and he added that. Originally, it wasn’t an element of the character.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Oh, it’s such a great visual.

MCDONAGH: Yeah. And Tom Waits is fantastic. I’ve loved him for years.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Let’s talk about Waits and his flashback. You might not be surprised at this but there were a couple of walk-outs during it last night during the head-cutting.

MCDONAGH: (Laughs.) And I tried to make that less gruesome.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: So you did? You were aware. I mean you must know that the movie is incredibly violent at times. You burn a man alive. Did you every worry that the movie was TOO violent?

MCDONAGH: All those things you can change in editing. I try to get what violence really is. It’s painful. It’s nasty. How do you show a “nice” beheading? Then, obviously, in the edit, you ask what’s too much? What’s enough? In that context, it’s a love story with the backdrop of gruesome serial murderers.



Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: And it’s CALLED “Seven Psychopaths”?

MCDONAGH: (Laughs.) Yeah. I don’t know what people were expecting. I want to capture the truth of it. I guess if you go in expecting a Hollywood comedy, you are going to be surprised. You’ve seen the title. Maybe if you’ve seen the trailer, you may be surprised.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: The trailer is a bit surprisingly light-hearted with dancing doggies. How do we feel about that?

MCDONAGH: Um. I...

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: If you want it to be off the record, you can.

MCDONAGH: Oh, no. I don’t say anything off the record. If I wanted to say fuck ‘em, I’d say fuck ‘em. (Laughs.) It’s broader than the film is necessarily. But I guess they’re trying to get as many people in as possible and all the stuff in it is in the film. I’m OK with it.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Whatever gets people in the seats.

MCDONAGH: Kind of. Yeah. The people who would appreciate it anyway are still going to go.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What are this film’s direct or your general cinematic influences?

MCDONAGH: I don’t think it shows in the film but [Sam] Peckinpah and Terrence Malick as opposing forces. The attempt at some kind of spirituality with Malick and the joy of the graphic...although I think people forget with Peckinpah that there are so many gentle moments and sadness.





Seven Psychopaths
Photo credit: CBS Films

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: I can see Peckinpah, for sure. Malick, I’m not sure I would have come up with...

MCDONAGH: (Laughs.) I needed some more plants. Rabbits.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Wheat.

MCDONAGH: Me, personally? It’s everything from...I’d say “Mean Streets,” for this, because of the dynamic of the two boys and the shifting alpha male dynamic. Oh! “Night of the Hunter,” which we almost rip off too much in a few places. Harry Dean standing under the light.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: That’s alright. More people should rip off “Night of the Hunter.”

MCDONAGH: Rip off the best. I do the voice of the girl to my girlfriend. [He then does an impression of the little girl from “Night of the Hunter” that’s truly spectacular.] I bet you’ve never met anyone who does that?

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Your theater experience — does it make you a different filmmaker?

MCDONAGH: I care about actors and their process more. I listen to them but I’m also very loyal to the script and the dialogue. It’s the combination of respecting their art and what they do and being true to me as a writer of dialogue. It’s taking the director out of that. I haven’t helped anyone in either of the films with their performances. I’ve just talked to them about the characters and let them bring the honesty in their craft.

See what that honesty brings when “Seven Psychopaths” opens nationwide on Friday, October 12, 2012.



[16]

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 5:15am):
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