

## Interview: Director Antoine Fuqua Lifts Up ‘Olympus Has Fallen’

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- [Aaron Eckhart](#) [2]
- [Angela Bassett](#) [3]
- [Antoine Fuqua](#) [4]
- [Denzel Washington](#) [5]
- [Dylan McDermott](#) [6]
- [Gerard Butler](#) [7]
- [Harvey Fuqua](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [Interview](#) [10]
- [Melissa Leo](#) [11]
- [Morgan Freeman](#) [12]
- [Olympus Has Fallen](#) [13]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [14]
- [Training Day](#) [15]

CHICAGO – The upcoming political action thriller “Olympus Has Fallen” has a familiar director behind it, the inventive Antoine Fuqua. Known best for “Training Day,” which won the Best Actor Oscar for Denzel Washington, he also directed “The Replacement Killers” (1998), “Shooter” (2007) and “Brooklyn’s Finest” (2009).

“Olympus Has Fallen” is somewhat of a departure for Fuqua, as it focuses on a large scale attack on the White House and the performances of an all-star cast. He directs heavy hitters such as Gerard Butler, Aaron Eckhart, Morgan Freeman and Melissa Leo as government officials in crisis, and keeps up a rapid heartbeat throughout the high concept scenario.



Gerard Butler (left) and Aaron Eckhart in ‘Olympus Has Fallen’  
*Photo credit: Millennium Films*

Antoine Fuqua was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and has some music royalty in his family. His Uncle Harvey Fuqua was the lead singer in “The Moonglows” and was instrumental in developing early Motown acts, and Harvey’s Uncle Charlie Fuqua was in the famous and influential group “The Ink Spots.” Antoine’s major film debut was with “The Replacement Killers” in the late 1990s, which culminated a few years later with 2001’s “Training Day.” He has worked steadily ever since, also making a mark in music video form as well as feature films.

HollywoodChicago talked with Antoine Fuqua during a promotional stop in Chicago for “Olympus Has Fallen,” and he spoke of the director’s craft and his influences.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You’ve seen the script, you’ve been hired as the director. In a grand spectacle such as the subject matter of ‘Olympus Has Fallen,’ what was the first thing you wanted to get a handle on before any pre-production began?

**Antoine Fuqua:** The first thing I thought of was the cast. How was I going to put together a cast of great individuals and have it not all be

leads? I already had Gerard [Butler] lined up to be the hero. I needed that someone who would be the Speaker of the House, and then become acting President, and that became Morgan Freeman. And then who would be President? I've always wanted to work with Aaron Eckhart, so I reached out to him. Secretary of Defense? She's not in there that long but she's powerful when there. It was Melissa Leo, because I needed a woman of the right age, strength and intelligence. The head of the secret service was written for a man. I thought why? I flipped it and got Angela Bassett, who has the right gravitas. It was a wish list and it just kept clicking.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How about the story elements in the film?

**Fuqua:** The next task was how, as a director, do I ground the movie and make it feel real and relevant? How do I attack the White House in a real way, so people believe it? I started calling people who were ex-Secret Service and military guys, and started working that out. That's how the process continued. How do I up the tension? How do I ground it? How do I make it feel more emotional?

And then working with Gerard, we tried to figure out who was this guy he was portraying, what is his journey, why is he there? He has to establish communications, he has to assess the situation, and he had to do it without making much noise.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You were working with so many new actors for the first time. Given your previous work and reputation, did any of those new performers have any expectations regarding your style?

**Fuqua:** We were always in sync, with like minds. For example, Melissa Leo is such a director's actor. She wanted me to have what I needed, and she gives it to me. Angela Bassett is the same way. With the men, they looked for a lot of veracity and toughness from me, and the acceptance of being uncomfortable a bit. It's a hostage situation, and when Aaron Eckhart is tied up as the President, he needed that push and edge – the lack of control, humility and degradation of a hostage atmosphere. When we got into the scene, the script called for him to put his hands up and he wouldn't do it. Then that edge started to happen. It built from that.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You got one the finest character actors of our times, Morgan Freeman, as yet another authoritative U.S. leader. How did you want to direct him to make this spin a bit different than his other portrayal of that type of character?

**Fuqua:** We talked a lot about the beginning of the film, when he is just the Speaker of the House, not necessarily the leader. He was thrust into the crisis situation, and he makes some bad decisions because that's not what he does. The President knows more about dealing with it, and he might have done things differently. The character of the general, Robert Forster, is pushing him to war. Morgan plays a guy in that position who is not used to that, and might agree with something that wasn't exactly the right call. He began the film as more of a worker bee, relative to the power of the presidency, that's the difference.

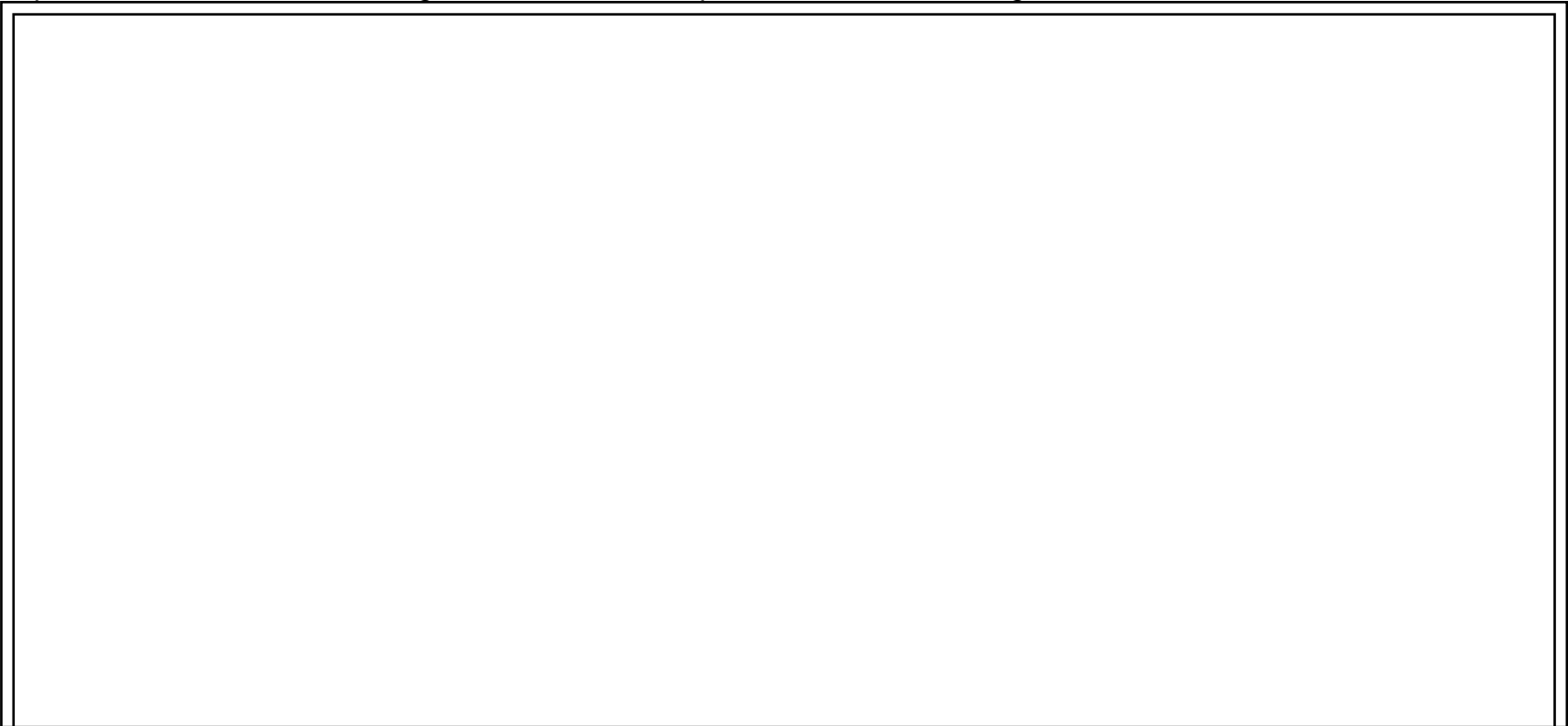
**HollywoodChicago.com:** This is a somewhat jingoistic, American prevails film. Did you have discussions with the screenwriters on the geopolitical intuition in the script, and were you satisfied with the direction of political philosophy in the film, given the current world situation?

**Fuqua:** Absolutely I was. First off, I wanted it to be patriotic, and patriotism has a different meaning now in our world. In an era of terrorism, this patriotism needs to be earned, it isn't easy. We've been through it lately, and it's okay to be proud, to show in a film that we have to earn it, to put that flag back up. It's going to be knocked down, it's going to get holes shot in it, we're going to lose good people and friends. But we have to put that flag back up and keep moving forward as a free nation, as positively as we can. The message of the film is that these things are going to happen, not if but when. And who are we when that dust settles? Can we continue being who we are?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There is an odd line of truth written into the script that was never really explored, especially considering the last presidential election. The villain accuses the president of being bought-and-sold to the tune of a half billion dollars, making the villain only an average traitor by monetary comparisons. What was the reasoning behind that particular line of dialogue?

**Fuqua:** It was there for a reason. It's again about earning back trust and respect from within our own country. Sometimes the threat isn't from outside, it comes from right within our own home. People are becoming disillusioned, upset and are losing faith. Some of it has to do with our government, and the politics associated with it, and with instant internet communication – right or wrong – it ends up there.

It begins with the people who are in service, I believe that anyone in the service of others has an honorable job. They should be paid more and respected more, and I think it's dangerous when we don't do either. If these people become disillusioned, because of Wall Street or the cost of presidential elections, it's dangerous. That was the point of that line of dialogue.







Antoine Fuqua Directs Morgan Freeman in ‘Olympus Has Fallen’  
*Photo credit: Millennium Films*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** According to my research, there were a bunch of projects you were considering after ‘Brooklyn’s Finest.’ Can you describe that journey and is it typical for a director of your status to have so many projects that tentative?

**Fuqua:** Yes, because films are complicated. The stars were lined up for this film, but the Tupac film – which I’m still involved with – needs script work and has to get there. Also ‘Hunter Killer,’ I need three strong stars, but I couldn’t get schedules together, so I couldn’t wait around for two years. It’s mostly because these films are announced too soon, and it’s not me announcing it. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your background in Pittsburgh includes your Uncle Harvey, who was in the music business, as well as his uncle, Charlie Fuqua, who was in the Ink Spots. How did this legacy in show business influence your journey within the system? Did they help you look out for yourself in the business?

**Fuqua:** Yeah, I’m still looking out for myself. [laughs] It never ends. After making enough mistakes and stepping on enough land mines, you just hope you have enough pieces of yourself left to get through it. What I learned from my relatives is that everybody has a time, and you have to make the best of your time and keep your finger on the pulse, and you try to make the work that you do not always just about you. Because Harvey was the lead singer of ‘The Moonglows,’ and discovered Marvin Gaye, he saw a talent greater than his, and stopped singing and promoted Marvin Gaye. He recognized that talent, and based his career on more than himself. That was my lesson. It is about the actors in my movies.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You’re a director who can’t necessarily be pinned down on subject or genre. Given that three of the recent Academy Award nominations had commentary regarding the U.S. African American experience – ‘Lincoln,’ ‘Django Unchained’ and ‘Beasts of the Southern Wild’ – but were directed by white men, do you ever foresee yourself directing a film specifically about the African American experience in the United States?

**Fuqua:** I do, I certainly do. I just want to find the right ones that mean the most to me, has the most substance, and elevates the subject matter. I don’t want to do it because of the color. I don’t live in that world. There are heroic and villainous figures in history that are grand stories of character, and that’s what I’m aiming for.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Which of the music videos you’ve shot best reflects your vision and attitude as a director, and why do you think that particular one stands out?

**Fuqua:** They all have pieces of me, but recently I did one for Lil Wayne called ‘Mirror,’ and that was an interesting one. It became like a painting, the idea was about the colors, the red representing blood and the black representing shadows. It’s about splashing the colors on the canvas, and the mirror on the wall was about how your would paint yourself. As a director, I’m at a place where I want to keeping painting, and go for subject matter that is provocative.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** As a film buff yourself, which of your director heroes were you able to meet along the way of your adventure, and what were you able to ask them that finally satisfied a life long curiosity?

**Fuqua:** Absolutely. I’ve been blessed to meet Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese and I got to spend some time with Sidney Lumet before he passed. Lumet used to come into the editing bay when I was cutting ‘Brooklyn’s Finest.’ He used to say ‘...that’s exposition, no one cares, cut it!’ [laughs] I loved that guy. I looked over occasionally in awe and thought, ‘that’s Sidney Lumet.’

I learned that that these guys were bold. The films had a veracity and were brave. They broke molds, twisted cinema, punched you in the gut, took on hard subjects and made it visually interesting. And I got to talk to each one about different things, mostly about actors, because in all of them there is this sense of that actor-director collaboration that goes deeper than people realize.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did you use that lesson?

**Fuqua:** I took that same energy in the work with Denzel [Washington] in Training Day, because I had one of the greatest actors in the world, like those guys had. The worst thing you can do with any of these great actors is tie their hands, because you might completely miss the creativity and all the good stuff that can come out.

*“Olympus Has Fallen” opens everywhere on March 22nd. Featuring Gerard Butler, Aaron Eckhart, Morgan Freeman, Melissa Leo, Angela Bassett, Dylan McDermott and Rick Yune. Written by Creighton Rothenberger and Katrin Benedikt. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. Rated “R”*



[16]

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- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/antoine-fuqua>
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