

# Interview: Chiwetel Ejiofor on American Samurai Journey ‘Redbelt’ From Mind of David Mamet

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CHICAGO – Chiwetel Ejiofor (pronounced *choo-ih-tell edge-o-for*) has been a stalwart film actor ever since his dramatic debut in Steven Spielberg’s “Amistad”. Since then, he has been a go-to character actor for directors as diverse as Spike Lee, Woody Allen and Stephen Frears.



His latest film is “Redbelt,” which is written and directed by the great Chicago playwright David Mamet. Ejiofor plays Mike Terry: a jujitsu master caught between his passion for the martial art discipline and the outside forces that want to exploit his talent for commercial means.



Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) and John Machado in “Redbelt”.  
Photo by Lorey Sebastian | © The Redbelt Company | Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Mamet weaves a compelling tale that’s set in modern Hollywood. It mixes the movies, an emerging new spectator sport and the men who desire the power associated with ownership in both media.



Cyril Takayama in “Redbelt”.

*Photo by Lorey Sebastian | © The Redbelt Company | Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

HollywoodChicago.com recently conducted a one-on-one interview with Ejiofor to tackle all aspects of the unique film including working with Mamet and his new respect for art of jujitsu.

“The first part of the pre-production area was dominated psychologically by my growing appreciation for the martial art form that is Brazilian jujitsu, which is so complex and brilliant,” Ejiofor said. “It’s one of those things that – once you have a plethora of moves you understand – you start to apply them. Then you realize truly how complex it is.”

Ejiofor plays Mike Terry. He’s a noble character, but with a sense of real-world propriety, he accepts that the world is sometimes a bitter place. The people around him don’t share his morality.



Chiwetel Ejiofor in Chicago on March 31, 2008 for “Redbelt”.

*Photo credit: Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com*

His wife frets about bills, his connected brother-in-law doesn’t understand him and even a new student (played with jittery effectiveness by Emily Mortimer) seems determined to unbalance his world.

Ejiofor added: “He has an unerring belief in his own moral code. Nothing that happens in the film ever comes close to breaking that.”

He continued: “Mike Terry is a man who has found a way to live in the present. Not to project into the future or reflect on what has happened, he lives in the now moment, which is part of the philosophy of being in martial arts. What I was communicating is the sense that he is still and always will be himself.”

David Mamet combines his famous rat-a-tat dialogue rhythms with a story that he describes as “American samurai”. While he populates the film with stock players like Joe Mantegna, he surprises with casting like comedic actor Tim Allen (here playing an action-film star whose sad cynicism reveals a finer acting depth).

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“I think Tim was great. He really seemed to be right into the role,” Ejiofor said. “He certainly disappeared into it. You felt that he was there and you weren’t working with someone who was trying to find something.”

Regarding the Mamet dialogue style, Ejiofor said: “I was well versed in it just by growing up with Mamet. I studied him in school. I was very familiar with his plays and screenplays. I did have a great love for his dialogue. I knew a bit about rhythms and enough about Mamet himself. I was happy to try and find a way in making that my own.”

Though the mixture of martial arts and modern American commerce make strange bedfellows in this unusual tale, Mamet makes it sing. He even adds Rocky-like fight sequences that work essentially.

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“If anything, the film is commenting on the way of how people through their own volition favor a simple way of living within their own moral framework, but find themselves at times vulnerable to the bigger machines at work,” Ejiofor concluded. “The lesson within the film is that if you maintain your own position, you’ll find ways of engaging if not defeating anything that comes your way.”

This collaboration of Mamet, Ejiofor and the purity of martial arts join forces for a captivating and one-of-a-kind film experience.

*David Mamet’s “Redbelt” – a Sony Pictures Classics release – opened on May 9, 2008 at Landmark’s Century Centre Cinema in Chicago along with other U.S. theaters.*



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