

## Interview: Ted Melfi Directs Bill Murray in ‘St. Vincent’

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CHICAGO – There are few better opportunities for a filmmaker than directing Bill Murray in a character role. Theodore “Ted” Melfi got that assignment, after pursuing Murray with his screenplay for the new film, “St. Vincent.” The effort to convince the veteran comic actor to take the title role paid off, and other notable actors joined in.



Director Ted Melfi On Set for ‘St. Vincent’  
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

When Ted Melfi wanted to show Bill Murray his script, he had to call an 800 number. After that was met with silence, the screenwriter/director was able to reach Murray’s attorney, who suggested that he call the 800 number. The connection was finally made, and Murray delighted Melfi with this interest in doing the film. Once Murray was on board, the production was also able to secure Naomi Watts, Melissa McCarthy, Terrence Howard Chris O’Dowd as the supporting cast.

Melfi had made a feature called “Winding Roads” in 1999, while doing his primary work as a commercial director. He warmed up to features again by doing some short films, and wrote the script for “St Vincent” in 2011. This story of a Vietnam veteran whose life starts to decline, was a perfect match now for Bill Murray’s career tendency to do character roles. HollywoodChicago.com caught up with Ted Melfi, as his film made its Midwestern debut at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had an epic journey to Bill Murray, during which he agreed to take the role. What gravitated the actor to the part once the script was in his hands, and what elements of Vincent’s character did he modify the most in his notes regarding the character?

**Ted Melfi:** He gave the script to one of his golf buddies to read, after he had read it, and his friend told him that the dialogue sounded like the way Bill Murray talked in real life. What he gravitated to was the piece within himself that connected to the character, a guy who is disenfranchised from the way the world is run. Bill is an outsider himself, and he related to the injustices that Vincent faced in trying to make things right, and that there was no payback for the character.

He didn't have a lot of notes, but what he had was very specific. He noted that I wrote the dialogue in 'backhand,' to use a tennis term, and he likes to work in 'forehand.' He would take a paragraph of dialogue, point towards the last two lines, and tell me to place them up front, to come right at it. At first I thought it was nuts, but it worked when I actually did it, and made the script sharper, funnier and better.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What part or subplot of the script was the last touch that you added, that allowed for the drama and comedy to flow, and established the overall story?

**Melfi:** The last thing we figured out happened on the set. Bill Murray and Jaeden Lieberher, the kid actor playing his neighbor, had become really close friends during the making of the film. About half way through, we decided we needed scenes of them together, just practicing pure joy. So we added these scenes, and none of them were scripted. The running through the parking lot scene, the bets, and dancing in the bar together were all moments we added in, because of their chemistry.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It seemed important to infiltrate the Catholic nature of the film early. What were you intending to say about the Catholic Church in your portrayal of the school, Chris O'Dowd's priest and the character of Oliver?

**Melfi:** I was born Catholic...

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Why do you think I asked the question, brother...we're fellow travelers...

**Melfi:** My experiences growing up Catholic were all positive, and the priests I met were all fantastic human beings, who dedicated their lives to God and the parishioners. The Church has taken a tremendous beating in the last 15 years, deservedly so in focusing on those unconscionable few.

But to take the whole thing and throw it out the window because of those few is very disturbing to me, because of what the Catholic Church does for humanity. I wanted to show a Catholic teacher who was moving the Church into today, and accepting of all religions, and that's where Catholicism is heading, finding peace in the whole existence. I wanted to show a positive Catholic experience.



Melissa McCarthy, Bill Murray and Jaeden Lieberher in 'St. Vincent'

*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The dissolution of the character Maggie's marriage was in the background, but is catalyst for her moving next to Vincent. How did that life tragedy play into how you and Melissa McCarthy wanted to interpret the role?

**Melfi:** When Melissa read the script, she connected to being a single mother right away, because she has two children of her own. She imagined and understood what it would be like to do that motherhood role on her own. She knows plenty of single mothers, so she was able to draw on that. We looked for the drama in the role, which I believe is the real strength of Melissa McCarthy.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had an all-star cast, with intense character actors Naomi Watts and Terrence Howard part of the mix. How much leverage will you give to an actor's feel for a role, and how much will you push back if you feel they are not delivering what you want?



**Melfi:** I gave them the ultimate freedom to go wherever they wanted to go, within the parameters of the character. I do believe that character and script come first, and then the actor is second. I have a strict philosophy about directing – I'm a person who doesn't want to put my 'stink' on something, meaning that the script is the boss.

The script tells you everything you need to do and how you need to do it, including how to shoot it and what's working. The flaw is making the script all about the director, slapping their stink on it instead of listening to what is in the script. When the actors listened to the script and became their characters, that works as well. When they didn't, I would just remind them of where they were within the timing of the story.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Vincent is a Vietnam veteran, and they are all approaching senior citizen status. What character traits does Vincent possess as a veteran, that both motivate and indicate his overall persona?



Ted Melfi in Chicago, October 14th, 2014

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Melfi:** As a Vietnam veteran who experienced combat, first and foremost he is a fighter. He approaches the world with the sense of whatever is not right, he will fight it. He confronts the bank when his finances dry up, and when they don't match what he wants, he closes his account. That's what a fighter does. He constantly lives his life in battle, and he fights to get ahead.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Now that you've worked with him intimately, what do you think the general media and public misunderstand about a late career and late life Bill Murray?

**Melfi:** They always want to access his fun and games side, because of his earlier comedic career. But Bill Murray is also very intelligent, in tune, in touch, serious and smart human being. He's just not a joke guy, he's so much more.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is the best advice someone has given you about directing, and what example in St. Vincent is a direct result of that advice?

**Melfi:** The best advice I received, quite a while ago, is to separate 'writer' and 'director' as quickly as you can, because once the film starts shooting the writer has to go away, even though 'St. Vincent' was my own script. The director must then appear, because if the writer is on the set, even mentally, the words take precedent over the acting and characters. Once the filming process starts, the words don't matter. You have to allow the actors freedom to roam, and if you focus just on the words, you've put a lid on the pot and stopped it from boiling.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are at the cusp of the end of the St. Vincent journey, which began three years ago when you wrote the script. Besides the casting, what moment of the production process keeps coming back to you, as an indication that this journey would come to the point at which you are at now?

**Melfi:** During the shooting, when Bill Murray sang Bob Dylan's 'Shelter from the Storm' towards the end of the production, we were all watching him, and moved to tears by it. That was the moment when it was really good for me.

*"St Vincent" has a limited release in Chicago on October 17th, and a wider release on October 24th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Bill Murray, Naomi Watts, Melissa McCarthy, Chris O'Dowd, Terrance Howard, Jaeden Lieberher, Nate Corddry and Ann Dowd. Written and directed by Ted Melfi. Rated "PG-13"*



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