

Interview: Director Pierre Morel on Sean Penn, Liam Neeson & His Latest 'The Gunman'

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CHICAGO – There were basically two careers for Pierre Morel, before he directed the mega-hit “Taken,” starring Liam Neeson, and afterward. The French-born cinematographer, camera operator and now director is releasing “The Gunman,” an action film that stars Sean Penn. Like “Taken,” the motivations for the action are based in the real world, and “The Gunman” travels to Africa, London and Barcelona on his way to redeeming his soul.

Morel has had an adventurous career, in both European cinema and in notable films, beginning with his days as a camera operator on “The Truth about Charlie” (2002), “The Dreamers” (2003) and “Before Sunset” (2004). He was the cinematographer on “The Transporter” (2002) and Director of Photography on “Love and Other Disasters” (2006). His breakthrough came in 2008, when he directed “Taken.” The film resonated with audiences, and allowed his career to move into a new direction.



Man of Action: Sean Penn in 'The Gunman,' Directed by Pierre Morel

Photo credit: Open Road Films

HollywoodChicago.com had a fun-loving conversation with Morel, who doesn't take too much seriously, until he does. The interview is a fascinating exploration into the policies and workings of the film industry.

HollywoodChicago.com: At this point in his career, what does Sean Penn want to explore as an actor, and how did you allow him to explore that side in 'The Gunman'?

Pierre Morel: You have to ask Sean. [laughs] But I think number one, it's about trying an action film. He was interested in this project, and our collaboration, to not just make an action film for action's sake. It's all about the complexity of the character, and the depth he can bring to it. If it's just a body attached to guns, what is the point?

HollywoodChicago.com: Given the circumstances of natural resource politics in Africa, what do you want people to take away from the political motivations of the assassination in 'The Gunman'?

Morel: I don't view it as a message movie. Well, it's not and it is. [laughs] In my films, I want to set the plot in the real world, and give them real issues. This was the case of 'District B13,' which took place within the suburbs of Paris, and the ghetto-ization of the communities there. Same for 'Taken,' because human trafficking is a real issue. And in this one, yes, the implication of western interests in developing countries who have desired natural resources, there is a lot going on. It's not based on real events, but the situation is there.

HollywoodChicago.com: So in the film you had to create real-looking newscasts, which are difficult to pull off, but yours were very effective. How do you plan something like that?

Morel: We took real footage, and then added newscasters who were not newscasters. We wrote the text, and recorded it specifically. It was based on how the BBC puts it together, but we placed fictional newscasters and networks, and made it relevant to what was happening.

HollywoodChicago.com: Creating a gun battle, such as the one that takes place in the Spanish country home, is like choreographing a dance. In the cooperative art form of film, who is your most vital assistant in creating the dance, and why?

Morel: I pre-plan a lot of that myself, through a floor plan. We look at an on-location layout, and create the energy through how the characters have to move to escape. I have tactical advisors, in this case guys from the British SAS [Special Air Service], who advised me on how they would approach the situation, and clear a house room by room. We worked with them, and I plotted it from there. Of course, there are stunt coordinators, special effects with the impacts on the walls, and the precision that comes with that.

HollywoodChicago.com: You filmed in both London and Barcelona. Which city has the most mystery in its atmosphere, and why do you think it feels that way?

Morel: It's not so much a mystery, but making the cities a character within the story. It's a color pattern with each. We start with Africa, where it's warm with a harsh sun, and a dustier ambiance. Then we moved to London, which I consider a capital of business. It's a place of power, with a corporate and cold feel. And then we moved to Spain, a weird place, a constant party. Setting a 'non-party' movie in a party atmosphere was interesting. It added another color.

HollywoodChicago.com: There was a Hitchcock tone in the suspense elements of 'The Gunman.' As a director, what type of building blocks in a story are best used to create suspense?

Morel: I don't know, I'm not smart enough to comment on that. [laughs] It's basically instinct, keeping the viewer on their toes and not lingering too much. And then when you do linger, it has an impact. It's all in the pacing, on the set or in the edit. So when you do slow down, there is 'something wrong.'



Sean Penn and Director Pierre Morel Converse on the Set of 'The Gunman'

Photo credit: Open Road Films

HollywoodChicago.com: You've come up through the ranks as both a camera operator and cinematographer. What makes you a better director with those two skills on your film resume?

Morel: I was about to say it makes it easier – but that's not it, because it isn't easy. [laughs] But it does help because the technical aspect of shooting, because the 'how am I going to do this?' I don't worry about, because I know how to do it. I still operate a camera myself, and still frame things, because I have a hard time giving that up. It's easier sometimes for me to do, than to explain to someone else, so I don't think the chain of command is broken. In essence, because I don't have an issue with shooting, it allows me to focus on being a director.

HollywoodChicago.com: You learned your craft in cinema school and in your early movies purely through the medium of film stock. Given this perspective, how has the game changed with digital film photography, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of the using this new way to film?

Morel: To be fair, I haven't changed a thing in how I approach the shoot. To me, it's just another medium. It doesn't change the craft on how you make a movie. The work flow of the 'data flow' is different from the camera chain to the editing booth, but the way you tell a story on set hasn't changed. The quality standards in using digital is the same as film, get the right Director of Photography and the right camera operators, and you can get fantastic results.

What is gone is the flaws of film stock, the artifacts of the aging process and what happens to film stock and its character. The grain, the saturation, are all qualities of film stock flaws, and the digital age and their engineers have taken that out of the equation. It's almost so flawless now, that it presents new challenges.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've worked with directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Jonathan Demme and Richard Linklater. Which of those three impressed you the most on how he communicated what he wanted?

Morel: In the Bertolucci film 'The Dreamers,' I did all of the fake stock footage of the background riots. I enjoyed it very much, and Bertolucci 'calmed me down' because he was so specific in what he wanted. With Richard Linklater, I did all of the Steadicam work on 'Before Sunset,' and there were two operators on that one. There were very few cuts in that film, it was all about the performances. It was the non-stop motion of the two characters in Paris. I worked the most with Jonathan Demme on 'The Truth About Charlie,' I did all of the work in that one. I love him to death, he's so fantastic, and so good with actors.



Pierre Morel in Chicago, March 9th, 2015

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You were involved in 'Taken' from the beginning, through Luc Besson's company. Given how the film has transformed Liam Neeson's career, what did you know about the film before you even shot it, that gave you an indication that it might be a big hit?

Morel: Nothing. You never know. If I knew, I'd be a billionaire. [laughs] There are many explanations for disasters, but for successes, you never know. Why did it work? It worked because of Liam, and because the core of the story was very visceral, and I think people could relate to it. It's the story of a guy that follows a trail to save his daughter. It's not a revenge movie, it's a rescue movie, which takes away the darkness, and makes it positive.

Everybody could buy into it – if you're a Dad, you'd love to be Liam Neeson. If you're a daughter, you'd love to have Liam for your Dad. [laughs] 'You mess with my kids, I'll mess with you.' We can all relate to that, and it becomes a simple emotional connection.

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously with the success of 'Taken,' the possibilities of what you could direct opened up. What have you learned through the last several years about the film business at your success level after 'Taken,' that you never knew about before?

Morel: It did open lots of doors, and I was able to explore projects that weren't possible before, and I was able to pass on projects that I would have had to do previously. [laughs] I've enjoyed these years, it's given me the opportunity to work on a 'Dune' remake, which I loved, and only because of the budget, it didn't happen. They gave me the keys to the Rolls Royce, because of the success of 'Taken.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you began your career in Europe, in your observation what do you think the European film business does better than the American film business and why?

Morel: I wish I was a producer, and then I could properly respond to that. [laughs] I actually observed that it's become more global, there isn't really a 'European' or 'American' difference, but financing and contributions from all over. The market is open – the grosses are not necessarily highest in the U.S.A. Everything is changing, and the American studios focus on the big franchises that they can control, but other films can be controlled all over the world.

"The Gunman" opens everywhere on March 20th. Featuring Sean Penn, Javier Bardem, Idris Elba, Ray Winstone, Jasmine Trinca and Mark Rylance. Screenplay adapted by Don MacPherson. Directed by Pierre Morel. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [23]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [22]

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