



SPECIAL REPORT

KILLING THEM SOFTLY

Playing a gangster requires the deft touch of a skilled actor

By Todd Longwell

THE ROLE OF A GANGSTER MIGHT SEEM a rough one at first glance, but playing one onscreen is a delicate art for the actor. Give the audience nothing but brutal pistol whippings and spittle-flying rants, and they will leave the theater unsatisfied. Viewers must be charmed, romanced with kind gestures and bonhomie, lured in by intoxicating style, as the actor sticks in the knife and twists, literally and figuratively.

"If you show in the very beginning, 'Oh, he's a monster,' it's a little bit boring," observes Armin Mueller-Stahl, who plays Seymon, a Russian mob leader who presents himself to the public as a grandfatherly London restaurateur, in Focus Features' "Eastern Promises." "Don't open the door too far. Leave it always a little bit closed. People should think about it. I tried to make this character as nice as possible. He's playing with the kids; he's teaching them the violin, telling them, 'You must practice, practice, practice.' In the beginning, it's not clear what kind of person he is. You think, 'Oh, he's a nice man.' Even Hitler was a charming man, but inside he was this great monster. That's very dangerous."

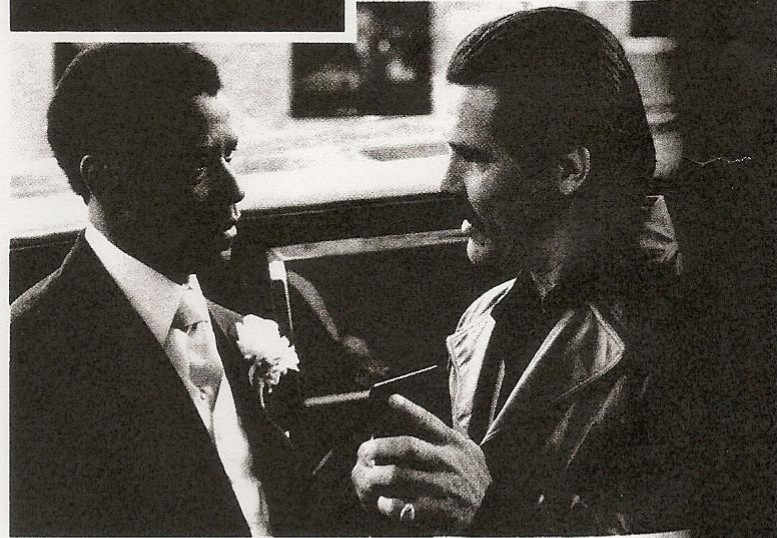
With the power and relative respectability of the New York City Police Department behind him, the character of corrupt Detective Trupo in Universal's "American Gangster," played by Josh Brolin, doesn't have to be so nice. He flaunts his power in the open, with a hard-charging aggressiveness that is evident in every movement he makes, even shaking down the very gangland figures he is supposed to be bringing to justice.

Brolin says the physicality of his performance was inspired by talks with Bob Leuci, a former NYPD narcotics detective, who was the inspiration for the book and the 1981 film "Prince of the City," and "Gangster" executive producer Nicholas Pileggi, who is best known as the screenwriter of director Martin Scorsese's underworld dramas "Goodfellas" (1990) and "Casino" (1995).

"(Pileggi) told me about a cop who people were terrified of, and it was a wonderful hook for me," Brolin says. "The guy supposedly looked a lot like Bobby Darin, and women loved him, and he was dangerous, and he was a scary motherfucker to most of the drug dealers out there. It was all because of how he carried himself and his smile, his über-confidence, and I wanted to do that."

In a sense, Trupo must out-gangster the gangsters. In one telling scene, he dons a black leather trench coat as if it's some sort of gangster uniform as he and his crew emerge from their car to confront Harlem drug kingpin Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington).

"By putting on the coat, does it lend to at least a cosmetic notion of what a gangster is? Is it like putting on a mask before you rob a bank?" Brolin asks, rhetorically. "Yes, I think in a roundabout way for sure. I think the idea of a gangster is much more effective when you inherit the



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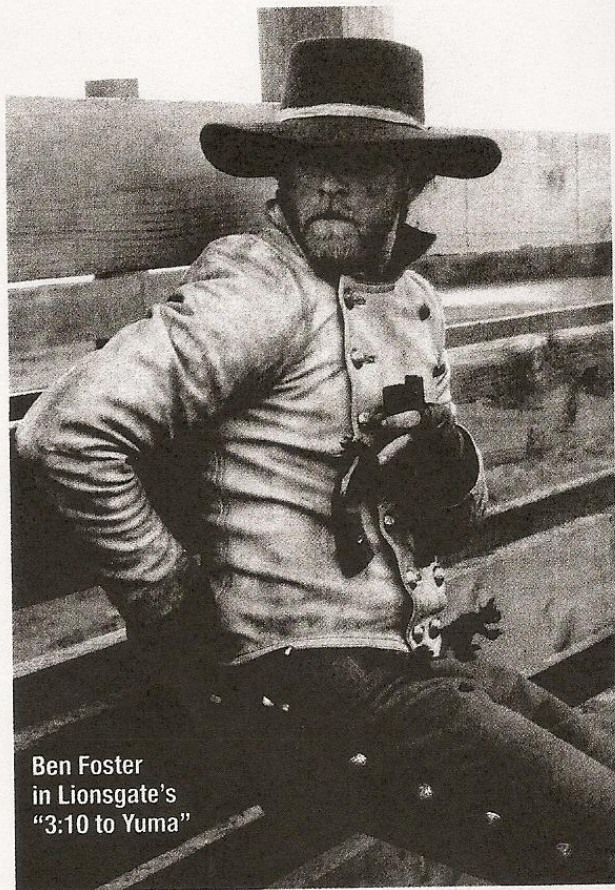
From top, Viggo Mortensen in Focus Features' "Eastern Promises"; Casey Affleck in Warner Bros.' "The Assassination of Jesse James"; and Denzel Washington, left, and Josh Brolin in Universal's "American Gangster."

affectations of what a typical gangster is."

But, in truth, the coat was a tool in an elaborate mind trick Brolin was playing to psych himself up for the scene.

"The coat that I was wearing at that moment was made for Denzel," Brolin explains. "He saw it and said, 'I don't want that coat.' I heard it was made for him, so I wanted the coat desperately, and it fit me. When I put on that coat, it was basically a 'fuck you' to Denzel, and it made me feel good in that role, because it was something that that guy would've done, so there was an undercurrent of how it made me feel."

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Ben Foster
in Lionsgate's
"3:10 to Yuma"

"I'VE BEEN REHEARSING PLAYING OUTLAWS SINCE I WAS 4. THIS IS JUST MAKE-BELIEVE ON A MUCH LARGER SCALE."

— BEN FOSTER

Softly

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the character that enabled me to better go head-to-head with Denzel in my mind."

Ben Foster's use of wardrobe to get him into the mind-set of his character Charlie Prince, the psychotic second-in-command to Old West gang leader Ben Wade (Russell Crowe) in Lionsgate's "3:10 to Yuma," is a more typical example of an actor working from the outside in. The film's costume designer was Arianne Phillips, whose credits include the rock 'n' roll movie musical "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" (2001) and the Johnny Cash

biopic "Walk the Line" (2005), as well as numerous music videos. As Phillips, Foster and the film's director, John Dahl, surveyed archival photographs of Western outlaws looking for inspiration, they all came to the same conclusion: Prince is a rock star, with the sort of flashy clothes, ambiguous sexuality, potential for violence and freedom from accepted social mores.

"The amazing thing about these outlaws is that they were very aware of their own PR, and they would try to get themselves in these penny papers at the time," Foster observes. "They had a very specific kind of flair. Arianne found this jax

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