



**NOTES FROM THE DREAM FACTORY** BY TOM ROSTON



# Role Call

Toni Collette as *Bridget Jones*?  
Robert De Niro as *Bill the Butcher*? The inside story on  
who gets what . . . and why.

HOLLYWOOD IS MADE UP OF LISTS. THERE ARE THE WEEKEND BOX OFFICE CHARTS that everyone pores over on Monday morning, and the lists of favorite directors that most actors keep in their heads. All producers worth their salt have a list of projects that they have in various states of development. And then there are the lists that determine who is up for the plum acting parts and who is considering a career doing voice-overs for PlayStation games. Studio suits, agents, producers, and directors put these latter lists together, pass them around, winnow them down, and fight over them in the maddeningly fickle process of casting movies. Some enthusiastically refer to casting as catching lightning in a bottle. To me, it looks more like a crapshoot.

When I go see a movie, I often find my mind shuffling through my own personal list of actors who could have played the character I am watching onscreen. When I watched *War of the Worlds*, I couldn't help wondering how the movie would have turned out if Steven Spielberg had stuck to his Richard Dreyfuss roots and tapped an offbeat daddy hero—say, Philip Seymour Hoffman. Imagine Hoffman huffing and puffing as he weaves between those exploding bodies. As exhilarating as Tom Cruise was in the lead role, I never felt the dread that I'd feel at the sight of Hoffman's gaping maw when he first sees the aliens. I always knew Cruise could do back flips over those tripods if necessary.

Whenever I see Nick Nolte or Laura Linney in a movie, I immediately think of their respective doppelgängers, Gary Busey and Hope Davis. Can't Nick and Laura take a break from chew-

**LINE 'EM UP:** An indie producer might come up with this list—Tobey Maguire, Jake Gyllenhaal, Hayden Christensen, Josh Hartnett, and Topher Grace—to cast the male lead of a film.

ing up those meaty roles and give Gary and Hope a shot? Or look at *King Kong*: It's a shame they didn't go to Thomas Haden Church for Jack Black's role—I think he could have provided the right balance between amoral creep and Barnum & Bailey goofball.

All that shuffling in my head is a faint echo of what actually happens umpteen times over before most movies are made. I may have some sick, suppressed faith in tyrants, but I like to think that the director gets to call the shots. The sad thing is, so many contingencies are involved that the director's top choice of an actor for a part is just one of many competing factors that go into casting a movie.

I recently wrote a piece for PREMIERE celebrating Viggo Mortensen's great performance in last year's *A History of Violence*, and I spoke with director David Cronenberg about getting him for the lead. I think Cronenberg is one of the best directors around (*Dead Ringers* and *Spider* are a couple of my favorite films),





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but when he talks about casting his movies, he sounds like a chump.

"You can get convinced to offer a movie to somebody who maybe is not bad for the role," he says. "I would never go to somebody who I thought is horrible, but maybe I would go for someone who is, in terms of acting talent, your second or third choice. But they're a bigger star [so] you figure, 'How bad can they be?'"

"And if you're lucky, that guy turns you down, and then you get the guy you wanted," he says. Jeez. Way to call the shots, Dave. The truth is, though, Cronenberg doesn't always rely on luck. He admits to using "devious" and "Machiavellian" tactics to circumvent the lists drawn up by the powers-that-be.

For *A History of Violence*, Cronenberg says he didn't have to resort to such tactics, but he concedes that Mortensen wasn't the first choice. "He was always on everybody's list," Cronenberg says. "You know how it is: First of all, they look at the budget and say, 'So, we need a star of x magnitude because the budget is x dollars.' But every executive has his own ideas as to what actor can support what budget."

Cronenberg says there was a list of ten actors who were in contention for the lead. "Some guys were not available. Some were too expensive. Some had been approached before and weren't interested. Ultimately, we were juggling three or four."

I got in touch with Fred Roos, the legendary producer and casting director who made his name choosing the cast for such films as *American Graffiti* and *The Godfather*, to get his take on all this. Roos is surprised that Cronenberg doesn't get the pick of the litter. "It seems like he would have earned the right to cast anybody he wants," he says. But Roos still relishes what he calls the "serendipitous" nature of moviemaking. "Movies are delicate. You can't just run numbers and expect things to come out, like insurance or other businesses. That's what makes it so much fun."

Roos and Francis Ford Coppola's casting achievements with *The Godfather* are legendary. But Coppola's ability to persuade the studio to back his cast (Marlon Brando instead of Ernest Borgnine; Al Pacino instead of Ryan O'Neal) is a feat of the past, Roos says. "I don't know if they would have let us cast the film that way if we were doing it today."

Very loosely, casting movies goes like this—there are hundreds of scripts floating around Hollywood, all in different stages of development. There are also hundreds of actors and directors trying to figure out which of those scripts will be their next gig. Some of them are attached from the get-go, but often the matching of an actor with a role is a process of packaging, usually shepherded by the talent agents. The agents, studios, producers, and directors each have their lists of who they want for a particular part. And they, often along with the casting directors hired for a project, all work together—or against one another—as they whittle down their respective lists until there's a final cast.



### TRADING FACES



Producer Graham King was told Robert De Niro (right) was more bankable than Daniel Day-Lewis (above) for *Gangs of New York*. For *The Aviator*, he was told Nicole Kidman (left) would sell better than Cate Blanchett (above).



This stuff is fresh on the mind of Tim Blake Nelson—a guy who knows the process from both ends, as a director (*O, The Grey Zone*) and an actor (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Syriana*)—because he's putting together the cast of a Depression-era road movie, *Seasons of Dust*. "There are three factors that go into casting an independent movie," he says. "And in this order, actually: Foreign sales bankability, because the bottom line is foreign presales. That's where you get your money. Number two is how an actor is perceived, particularly by the American public, in a way that will influence his or her stature in the picture. And then number three is just pure suitability for a role. You would hope that this would be in complete reverse order, but it's actually on its head." (Rather than relying on presales, studio films use

their own box office and ancillary profit projections to determine an actor's bankability.)

For *Seasons of Dust*, Nelson had the smarts or good fortune to get the talented up-and-comer Kate Bosworth attached to the lead role. And when she was cast as Lois Lane in *Superman Returns*, her bankability skyrocketed. *Dust* has a ballpark budget of \$10 to \$15 million, which gives us a sense of the clout that Bosworth has with foreign distributors.

Nelson is still casting the male lead and admits to having a list, but he's not willing to tell me who's on it. That's the thing about these lists—everyone uses them, but they are fiercely guarded because it's rarely in the filmmakers' interests to have everyone know who rejected them or whom they never asked.

I don't know the names on Cronenberg's list, either; he didn't tell me. Nor did his casting director, Deirdre Bowen, who tried to convince me that these lists aren't really ranked. "Who's first choice, who's second choice' is not fair because it sounds like if you're not the first choice then you're a poor second, and that's hardly the case," she says.

Bowen's point is that because there is such an ebb and flow of information being passed back and forth during the casting process—that just because certain names are discussed first—doesn't necessarily

mean one is valued more than the next. She adds that one of the strongest factors determining the lists is who's available. Bowen doesn't deny that she draws up lists, though. And she alludes to master lists that the international distributors put to-

gether. "I've heard that there are almost, like, computer programs that track how well movies have done financially. And therefore they have a list which means 'these are the golden people.'"

In search of one of these "golden" lists, I called up Penny Karlin, who's an acquisitions agent for foreign distributors. "Producers, sales companies, talent agencies, or packagers come to us, and ask us, 'Okay, we have this script with this list of talent. Can you give us a rating on who you think would be best on an international basis?'"

That makes Karlin sound like a number-cruncher, but she's not. She speaks intelligently about the importance of good scripts, good acting, and good directing. But still, al-



## AN A-LIST (ONE OF MANY)

One foreign distributor's ranking of bankable actors.

1 Tom Cruise	10 Russell Crowe	19 Jude Law	28 Ewan McGregor
2 Johnny Depp	11 Richard Gere	20 Edward Norton	29 Ken Watanabe
3 Brad Pitt	12 Jim Carrey	21 Guy Pearce	30 Clint Eastwood
4 George Clooney	13 Denzel Washington	22 Gael García Bernal	31 Gerard Butler
5 Keanu Reeves	14 Harrison Ford	23 Colin Farrell	32 Arnold Schwarzenegger
6 Tom Hanks	15 Hugh Grant	24 Sean Penn	33 Haley Joel Osment
7 Leonardo DiCaprio	16 Bruce Willis	25 Tobey Maguire	34 Kevin Spacey
8 Nicolas Cage	17 Matt Damon	26 Hugh Jackman	35 Ben Affleck
9 Orlando Bloom	18 Mel Gibson	27 Hayden Christensen	

though it's possible that producers heard her deconstruct the merits of the best Alexander the Great script when three were vying for the green light, I assume they were more impressed by her feedback on Angelina Jolie's excellent ratings in Germany and Korea. (Jolie as Colin Farrell's mom? Brilliant!)

Bigwig producer Graham King, who works closely with Karlin, sometimes gets casting suggestions from foreign distributors. When he was trying to presell *Gangs of New York*, he was told that Robert De Niro would be a better pick for Bill the Butcher than Daniel Day-Lewis. For *The Aviator*, he heard that Nicole Kidman would be a better Katharine Hepburn than Cate Blanchett. Although King, and Martin Scorsese, his director for both films, didn't heed either suggestion, he concedes the pressure to get a bankable cast is huge because the names on the poster alone can determine as much as 75 percent of a film's box office. "There's been times where an actress or actor has been hot and then by the time you're going into production he or she's not so hot, and someone has spoken about replacing them," King says. "That's the business we're in."

It reminds me of how Toni Collette broke Hollywood's casting omerta last year when she told the press about how she had been offered the lead in *Bridget Jones's Diary* but because she was committed to a Broadway musical, Renée Zellweger got the part. Collette said she had also been cast in *Chicago*, but when Zellweger soared post-*Jones*, she was given Collette's role. Damn.

The actors I have talked with about the casting shuffle have the same perspective: It's all part of the game. A couple years ago, I spoke with Paul Bettany about *Wimbledon* in a bar in Brooklyn, and we discussed how Hugh Grant had originally been slated for his role. "You have to have an awareness of where you are on the food chain. Hugh Grant got too old to play the role, and that's fucking fine by me," he said. "That's how careers go."

For his part, Viggo Mortensen shrugs off the prospect that he may not have been the first guy asked to play the lead for *A History of Violence*. "I'm sure there were other people considered before me," he says, before grumbling about how media outlets exploit the competition between actors to draw viewers and readers.

Eventually, I was able to get my hands on one of those "golden" lists (see above). My source doesn't want me to reveal where I got it from, but here it is, a prominent foreign distributor's list of male actors, ranked in terms of bankability in one country. I have to say, it's remarkably banal. Cruise, Depp, Pitt . . . Not many surprises, although there is something so literal about it that it's unsettling. It's as if you were able to rank all the kids in your high school in terms of popularity—it's sickening and intriguing and pretty predictable all at the same time.

This list has changed a bit since they were casting *A History of Violence* in 2004, but I have another one from that period (DiCaprio was higher, Depp was lower) and what both lists share is the complete absence of Mortensen. Even though *Violence* was a studio-produced movie, and therefore didn't rely on such a list, this ranking strongly suggests that there must have been more bankable actors whom he eclipsed. Hooray for artistic integrity! Hooray for directors like Cronenberg who benefit from working the system! Movies are still an art form, even if it is the art of compromise. And as long as casting is in some ways a leap of faith, then movies have more opportunities to allow unexpected bursts of brilliance—like Mortensen's performance—to happen.

Still, I have to wonder if Mortensen got the nod to play the fortysomething ex-criminal because Haley Joel Osment (#20 two years ago!) wasn't available.

E-mail your movie missives and misgivings to [dreamfactory@hfmus.com](mailto:dreamfactory@hfmus.com)