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INTO THE FIRE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE FORTE

by Dylan Callaghan

Proving yet again that “forbidden fruit is sweetest,” scripter/director Joe Forte credits a childhood in which movies were taboo to his current life in cinema. “I was raised as a fundamentalist born-again Christian,” explains Forte, whose first produced feature, the Harrison Ford anchored cyber-thriller *Firewall*, hits theaters today. “Movies were not considered a good thing, so they always fascinated me.” Forte’s fascination helped him earn a degree from NYU’s vaunted film program and, after a few years in advertising in New York, finally brought him west in the mid nineties. With several scripts sold and several other projects already in the pipeline - including a big-studio tent-pole that’s strictly hush-hush - Forte spoke with the Writer Guild of America, west Web site about the fundamental fear behind the story for *Firewall* and how his time as a screenwriter has taught him that no writer should be too disciplined.



In many ways *Firewall* seems like a bid to bring the classic 1980-90s Hollywood thriller into the 21st century.

I can't make that claim. I was just trying to write something that scared me and thrilled me. I wanted to make something that was really visceral, where, once you get in the tunnel of the movie, it grabs you by the throat and doesn't let you go 'til it's done. It definitely speaks to the post-9/11 [era].

Part of it was based on a personal experience. I had a family member who got into a bad situation with a bunch of people who were robbing him. I was gonna go down and stand up for him and my wife said, “Don't take your license.” I said, “Why,” and she said, “What if they start coming after us?” That idea really petrified me. It was also six or seven months after 9/11, so that whole idea of someone using your tools against you to undo you was one of the things that really resonated.

I have heard from a lot of screenwriters that, because filmgoers are so much more savvy these days, thrillers are among the most difficult scripts to keep edgy and surprising. Do you agree?

Yeah, I guess I agree with that, but I wasn't really conscious of it when I was writing. To me, stories are gifts; you just start on one and when it works, it works. I guess by putting myself in the shoes of the character, I was able to surprise myself.

If you can't surprise yourself, you can't surprise anybody. What's interesting about this villain, [for example], is that he's able to assume a level of anonymity that was unheard of before cell phones and the internet. That anonymity was interesting to me.



Photo: © Warner Bros.
Virginia Madsen in *Firewall*.

Having said that, when it comes to the process of writing plot twists and surprises, did you outline a lot or rewrite more? It sounds like you went a pretty organic route.

It did feel organic. Later in the script there was more construction as far as paying the situation off, but it was organic.

You just kind of ran with the premise and surprised yourself as you went?

Yeah. What it all came to was this final dilemma of the main character: In order to save something he loves, he has to destroy something he loves. This guy, who's spent his life building this security system, has to destroy it to save his family. At its base, this movie is about vulnerability and invulnerability and how this man has built a life that seems invulner-

able until the villain finds his one weakness and climbs right in it.

Was Harrison Ford always in your mind as the star?

I followed my own organic track, [but] I did write it for a movie star, a major male lead. After several drafts, Jonathan Sheslack (a producer on the film) and I started thinking about who it could be and we thought about Harrison. So we sculpted it a little bit toward him, not necessarily to go after him, but to have a template in mind. Originally the lead was a 40-year-old who had a five-year-old and a seven-year-old. When Harrison came on board, that changed the calculus.

Other than those kinds of details, how much did you customize the script to capitalize on Ford's strengths?

Harrison is very hands-on and has a really strong sense of himself and his audience. I think Harrison is a minimalist; he's really economical and spare. He simplified it in a way that made it very streamlined and direct. We all followed that track.

Do you like that track?

It was a fascinating process to take something and economize it. I wrote it the way I would have wanted it, but having said that, seeing someone else's process is really interesting. I learned a lot. I may not make those choices, but at the end of the day, he's working off a point of

view. You want to work with someone who has a point of view. If it's not your point of view, that's OK. As long as they have a point of view, it's satisfying.

Completely changing the subject, are you a disciplined writer?

I think my instinct is to be disciplined and I've tried to become less disciplined.

That's interesting. Elaborate.

I think you can get too much in a rigid box. As a writer, you need to have experiences; you need to be in the world to fill up your tank. Earlier on, I would write eight hours a day and never break. Part of that was just fear. Now I think it's more important to write four good hours than to be in a room all day long thinking you're writing. I allow myself to follow instinct more. I try and write every day, but I try not to be so rigid about where those hours fall in the day.

You can't do it in a vacuum...

You can't do it in a vacuum. There are times when I climb into a hole and I'm in a vacuum for a couple months. That's usually when there's a deadline or I've gotten to the point in the process where I'm so riveted I can't pull myself away. But after that, I allow myself the time to not write. I recharge and keep it fun.