

MEN IN THE MOVIES

THE KILLER'S POINT OF VIEW

Clint Eastwood as "Dirty" Harry Callahan, perhaps his most career-defining role, is certainly riveting,



but many audience eyes were fixated on his nemesis: the Scorpio Killer, a sociopathic serial murderer played by the then-unknown Andy Robinson. Nearly 40 years since *Dirty Harry* came out, Robinson is still often typecast as a psycho. Yes, he was that good — so good,

in fact, that he received multiple death threats after the movie's release. Here, Robinson answers a few questions on his experience as one of the most convincing psychos ever portrayed on screen.

If you were a young actor playing Scorpio today, what would you do differently?

I would have to ask the same question I asked in 1971: What in my life experience or imagination would drive me to this kind of murderous behavior? The physical image of the Scorpio Killer would look different in 2008, but not by much. Instead of Vietnam, we have Iraq, and the violence of the criminally insane will sadly always be among us.

Did you find it difficult to shed your onscreen persona off the set or after filming ended? Were you ever scared of yourself while you were in character?

Because I was working so deeply and intensely, there were times when it was difficult to let the character go. The careful viewer will notice that my face literally changed during the course of shooting, which we shot pretty much in sequence, and it became more distorted as the filming went on. After we finished the final scene when Scorpio is blown away into the quarry, and I climbed back up to dry ground, the first thing my wife said was, "Thank God you're back." I was disturbed playing this character, certainly, but I was also elated because I knew I was onto something authentic. The only time it scared me was when I first saw a rough cut of the film in a Warner Brothers screening room.

What was it like playing someone so diametrically opposite you?

As an actor, you pray for roles like Scorpio. I was never the kind of actor who set out deciding that



Andy Robinson as the Scorpio Killer in *Dirty Harry*. Photo © Warner Bros. Entertainment

***"I WAS DISTURBED PLAYING THIS CHARACTER, CERTAINLY, BUT I WAS ALSO ELATED BECAUSE I KNEW I WAS ONTO SOMETHING AUTHENTIC."* —ANDY ROBINSON**

I was going to play every role like Andy Robinson. Acting for me is playing different characters, and I went to school to learn how to do that. The bigger the gap between myself and the character the happier I am. That's what I teach in my MFA acting program at the University of Southern California.

What other film characters remind you of Scorpio, ones that sent a chill down your spine?

When I was a kid, Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death* and Jack Palance in *Shane* gave me the willies. John Malkovich in *In the Line of Fire* and Michael Rooker in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* were also very convincing.

You received death threats after the movie came out. Aside from the potential harm a death threat carries, did you view it as an affirmation of your acting abilities?

Well, yes, death threats are a drag, but I have to admit that their response was proof that the character disturbed them. Unfortunately, a lot of people in the business didn't realize that an actor played the role of Scorpio. One casting agent admitted to me years later that when she saw me through a window coming for a job

interview, she immediately told her secretary to cancel the meeting.

You were relatively unknown at the time and Clint Eastwood handpicked you for the role. How did that feel?

Clint came to see me in an Off Broadway play. He left after the first act and I thought that was it — obviously I had totally blown the opportunity, until a week later when my agent called with the offer. I was over the moon.

The whole experience was like a dream. Clint was a great role model; in every way he conducted himself like the consummate professional he is. To work with someone like him on my first film was an eye-opener. He was a movie star and a producer of the film, but first and foremost he took care of business as an actor.

In your opinion, what has been the impact of Dirty Harry on both the film industry and society in general? Why has it endured so long? What makes it a classic?

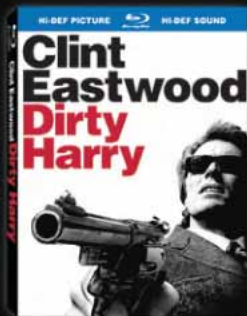
The film broke a lot of new ground. It put together all kinds of genres — cop movie, horror, Western — and told a classic American story of a

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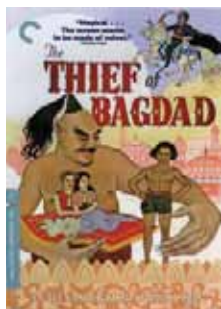
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dirty fight between good and evil. It was a film of its time. Don Siegel [the director] and I reckoned that the Killer just got back from Vietnam, and the arguments over law and order versus vigilantism, civil rights versus public safety, were dramatically played out by the cat-and-mouse relationship between Harry and the Killer. We like to think of the 60s as a mellow time, especially in San Francisco, but there was a real tension between the polar forces of left-wing politicians and hippies on one side and the folks who supported the war and Goldwater and Nixon on the other. The war, Kent State, Chicago, the riots and the assassinations, the energy of that time is the energy of the film. Right wing, left wing, Pauline Kael's cry of fascism, the movie divided a lot of people. One director almost didn't hire me for a film because I was in *Dirty Harry*.

But for me it all comes down to a morality tale with a twist. Harry kills the Killer and then throws his badge in the quarry because he got too dirty and found himself outside the law. A bent morality tale for a truly bent time.



A LEGEND BEFORE ITS TIME

The 1940 version of *The Thief of Bagdad* is an amalgam of the Arabian Knights tales, replete with lush storytelling, unexpected humor and deft details. The special effects, for which it is most famous, include a flying horse, a magic carpet, a giant spider and a wish-granting genie.

"What's really exciting is the story about the making of the movie, which many people are unaware of," says Craig Barron, a special-effects industry veteran who consulted on the recent special edition DVD. "In some ways it's more dramatic than the film itself."

Legendary producer Alexander Korda ushered in a new era of filmmaking with *The Thief of Bagdad*, and Hollywood hasn't been the same since. It was Korda's dream to create the best fantasy film ever made, and its three Oscars — for art direction, cinematography and special effects — along with undying fan loyalty are testaments to his success.

"Korda was a visionary," says Barron. "He was the [George] Lucas of his day." In order to produce *The Thief of Bagdad* in the extraordinary manner he desired, Korda developed many techniques specifically for the film. The most important innovation was blue-screen



Alexander Korda

technology. Larry Butler, who was credited as the director of special effects for the movie, pioneered the blue-screen technique in order to achieve the unprecedented visual effects.

"The fact that we use the blue-screen technique to this day, albeit modified for the computer age, is evidence of Korda and his crew's

sheer innovation," says Barron. "Blue-screen is the reason *Star Wars* was able to be made." Lucas and Spielberg were greatly influenced by *The Thief of Bagdad*, as well as by Korda's innovation in general. On the DVD, Francis Ford Coppola talks about Korda's, and the film's, impression on him.


There's also a great interview with Dennis Murren on the DVD, adds Barron, citing Murren's noted work with today's foremost special-effects gurus, including Spielberg, Lucas and James Cameron. Murren's the man responsible for the computer-generated dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, which was a quantum leap forward for cinematic visual effects. Those who like to know about the inner workings of moviemaking, especially its technical aspects, will really enjoy these interviews.

"*The Thief of Bagdad* was a great inspiration to my generation of special-effects practitioners," says Barron. "Back then, blue-screen and traveling-matte techniques were considered trade secrets that can now be talked about and appreciated. I think it's wonderful that Criterion Films is finding new ways to increase public appreciation of filmmaking in all its aspects. As visual effects continue to grow almost exponentially in importance, it's vital that we find ways to maintain a historical perspective on the development of effects technology, techniques, and artistry."

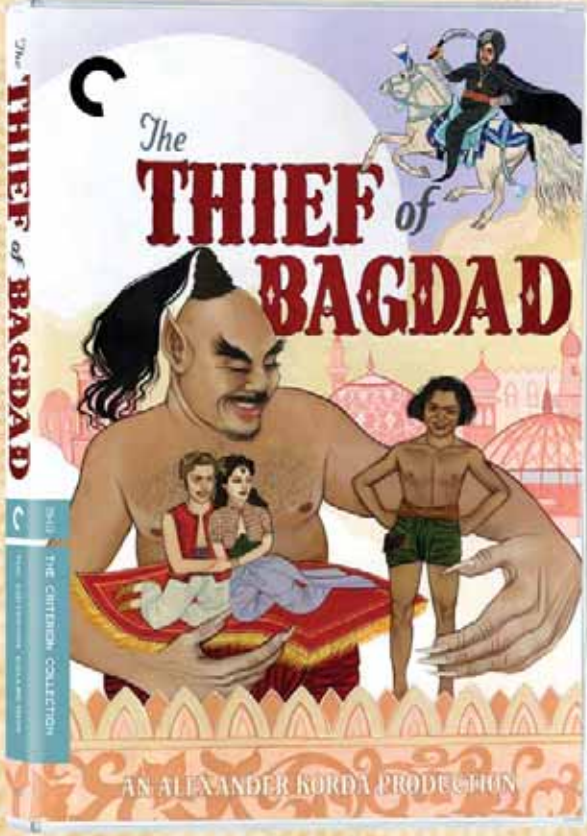
Visual effects are an indispensable part of movie history, Barron says: "Modern movies are rooted in the classic films and iconic moments that have influenced the art form and still resonate in the culture. And visual effects have been vital in creating those films and conjuring those magical moments."

Not only was the film a major challenge both artistically and technically, but also logistically. Filming began in England but had to relocate to the US due to the outbreak of World War II. There's been great debate among fans about which scenes were filmed in England and which were filmed in the US. Unfortunately, most of the people involved with the film are no longer alive, so a definitive answer is unlikely.

"I remember loving this movie as a kid but feeling disappointed with the current crop of movies, which were all hard-boiled cop movies," says Barron. "What I wanted was more fantasy stuff like *The Thief of Bagdad*. Lucas and Spielberg put the fun back into films. They made the films that young boys wanted to see." ■



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