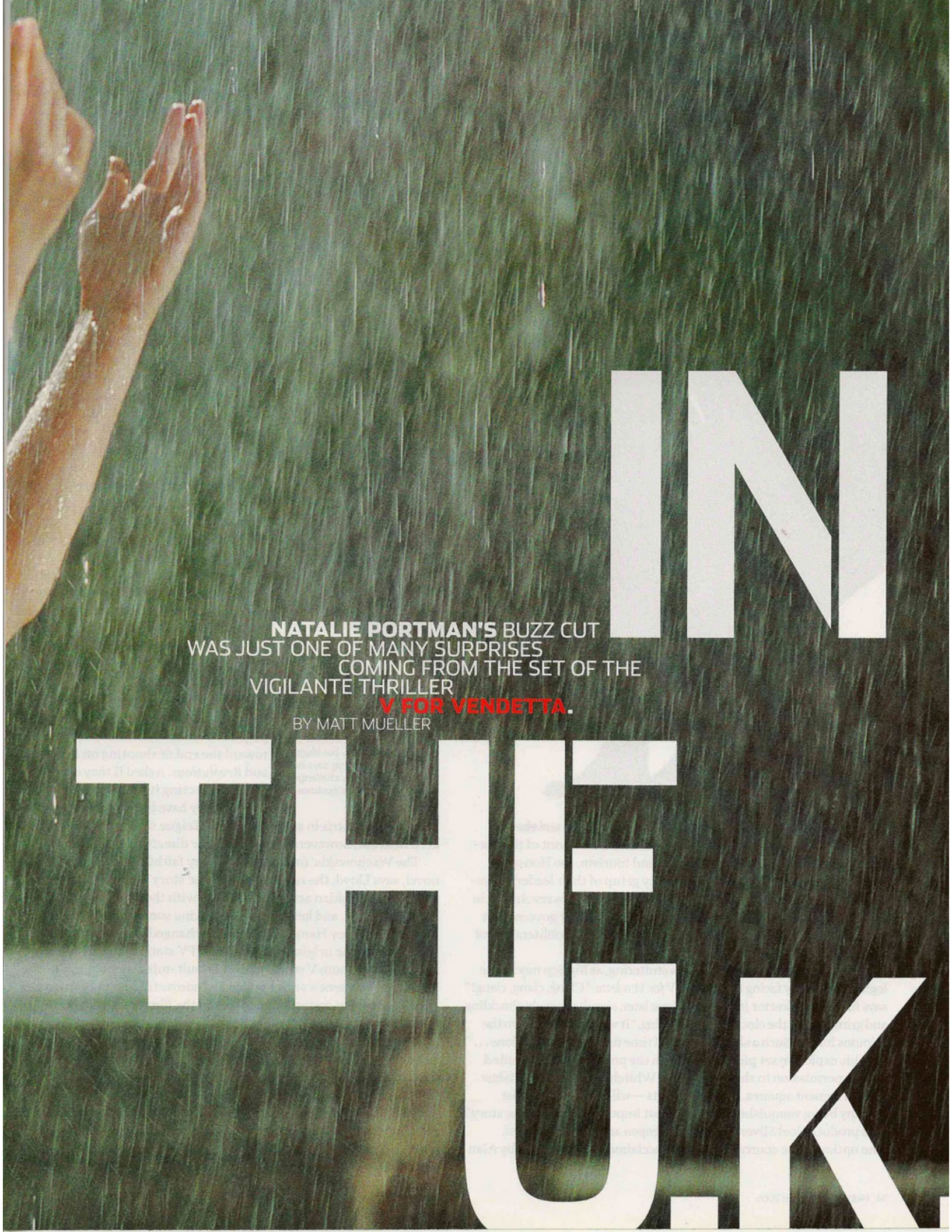


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**NATALIE PORTMAN'S BUZZ CUT
WAS JUST ONE OF MANY SURPRISES
COMING FROM THE SET OF THE
VIGILANTE THRILLER**

V FOR VENDETTA.

BY MATT MUELLER

THE



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a cool June night in London, hundreds of masked and ebony-cloaked figures mass behind concrete roadblocks in front of that enduring symbol of Western democracy and tourism, the Houses of Parliament. Dressed in the 17th-century getup of their leader, a mysterious and charismatic vigilante named V who ignites revolution in a near-future totalitarian society, they face off against government militia in a barnstorming climax that will involve the obliteration of Britain's seat of power.

Tonight, though, the revolution is stuttering, as Big Ben mocks the logistical urgency facing the crew of *V for Vendetta*. "Clang, clang, clang!" says first-time director James McTeigue later, simultaneously chuckling and grimacing at the clocktower's gonging. "It was counting down the minutes for me! Such a short amount of time to get everything done..."

This explosive set piece—for which the production was granted unique permission to shut down all of Whitehall, between Trafalgar and Parliament squares, for three nights—will symbolize fascist tyranny being vanquished. "It's the most important thing in the story," says producer Joel Silver (the *Lethal Weapon* and *Matrix* movies), who optioned the source material, an acclaimed graphic novel by Alan

Moore and David Lloyd, when it was published back in 1990. But front-page news soon thrust *V for Vendetta* into an uncomfortable position the filmmakers say it doesn't deserve. Five weeks after this scene was shot, the July 7 terrorist attacks in London shifted the focus to some undeniably eerie parallels in the movie's plot, including a key sequence featuring a subway train crammed with explosives.

"There is the subject of terrorism in the movie, but it's a different kind of terrorism," says Silver. "This is a comic-book story, like *Batman* or *Superman*. I mean, *War of the Worlds*, those big tripods—they blew up everything! Yes, there was one shot in *Spider-Man* where they took out the Twin Towers [from a teaser trailer and poster], but, you know, that was just being human. This is not a story about what's occurring now. It's fictional."

Long before concerns about current events arose, *V for Vendetta* was attracting an unusual amount of interest because of its screenwriters and second-unit directors, *Matrix* creators Andy and Larry Wachowski. Last night on the set, the famously private brothers (who are also producing) orchestrated the street action alongside McTeigue, who was their first AD on the *Matrix* films. Today, says Silver, "they weren't on set every minute, but they were around."

Hired by Silver before *The Matrix*'s 1999 release to write a *Vendetta* screenplay, the Wachowskis revived the project toward the end of shooting on *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. Asked if they ever considered directing it themselves, Silver says, "It may have been a little close for

MASK, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE:
It was hot, but Hugo Weaving says he enjoyed the challenge of V's costume.

them to *The Matrix* in some ways." (McTeigue says the brothers did keep final cut, however: "I'm a first-time director. It's not unusual.")

The Wachowskis' first script was very faithful to the graphic novel, says Lloyd; the rewrite infused the story with some distinctively Wachowskian action and fiddled with the novel's structure, incendiary plot, and key characters—axing some and altering others, in particular Evey Hammond, who has changed from the malleable street waif of the original into a plucky TV station employee with a tragic past, whom V rescues from assault-minded members of the fascist government's secret police and converts to his rebel cause. "She's a stronger counterpart to him in the film," says Natalie Portman, who, as Evey, has her head shaved onscreen in a pivotal torture sequence, a coiffure makeover that caused a global sensation at last year's Cannes film festival. "You get to see her develop a political consciousness," Portman adds, "which is amazing." Filling out the cast are such stellar U.K. actors as Stephen Fry, Stephen Rea, Sinéad Cusack, and John Hurt, who plays the head of the totalitarian government (a neat inversion of his casting long ago as the beleaguered Winston Smith in 1984).

Vendetta started shooting in March 2005 in Berlin's Babelsberg studios. One thing the Wachowskis kept intact was V himself, a kind of superhero (played by Hugo Weaving) with admittedly psychopathic tendencies, ferocious combat skills, and a Grand Guignol approach to blowing up London landmarks. "He's a fascinating man," muses Weaving (Agent Smith in the *Matrix* films). "He's someone who's been tortured and profoundly damaged by the state, this dark avenging angel who's out to take revenge on the perpetrators of the torture. And the other side is this more heroic figure, who is attempting to get people to take responsibility for their lives rather than leave it up to the government."

It's precisely this blend of flamboyance and dementia that has given *Vendetta* its devoted following in the comic-book fraternity. Those fans can also be notoriously critical, however. Moore distanced himself from the movie early on (and his name is not in the movie's credits), but Lloyd appeared at the Comic-Con convention in July in an apparent effort to forestall sniping. "They put their own stamp on it," says Lloyd of the Wachowskis' screenplay, "but it keeps the key scenes, it keeps the spirit, and it's got integrity. A lot of people were concerned that it might be turned into a simple vengeance story of some crazed vigilante against bad guys. But it's much deeper than that."

A few weeks into shooting, the production encountered its first speed bump when the original V, James Purefoy (*Vanity Fair*), was replaced by Weaving. Switching your lead actor—even one who spends the entire film behind an immobile, leering Guy Fawkes mask (Fawkes was a coconspirator in a Catholic plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605; his failure is celebrated annually on November 5)—is no casual decision. "The mask was always going to be tough," says McTeigue hesitantly. "James is a great actor, but . . . we had to make a change."

Silver is a bit more blunt. "This is a voice-over gig," he says. "I doubt if James Earl Jones ever came to the set of *Star Wars*. I see it in very similar fashion. They just weren't happy with James's reading of their lines. . . . They love Hugo and they really wanted him in the first place, so we made the decision. It was exclusively a voice thing."

Weaving arrived in Berlin five days after McTeigue called (no, he didn't show up growling, "Surrprised . . . to see me?") and embraced



"the absolute challenge of making the mask work," he says. He was pleased when Purefoy sent him a letter giving his blessing. "He didn't have to do that, and it was very sweet of him."

Portman, who was surprised by the change—"It's not like there was any weirdness on set," she says—feels his spirit will live on in the film. (In fact, says McTeigue, some of Purefoy's work ended up in the final cut.) But she calls Weaving "wonderful," and the adjustment never dimmed her passion for the project's thorny dilemmas: How far would you go for your beliefs, and does using violence to fight oppression make you a terrorist or a freedom fighter?

"The thing I like and the thing that's scary is that I don't have any set opinions about the issues in the film," says the actress, who, as Evey, takes an active part in the decision to convert Parliament into a smoldering ruin. "I don't think there's a clear message. The whole point of the movie is to spark debate because

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE FILMED: Above, director James McTeigue confers with a pre-shorn Natalie Portman; right, James Purefoy (top) was replaced as V by *Matrix* alum Weaving (below). "This is a voice-over gig," says producer Joel Silver. "James's voice just didn't have the same resonance." Below, a climactic scene at the Houses of Parliament pits V's look-alike followers against the government's militia.



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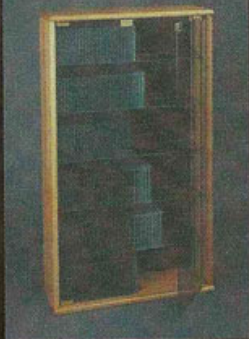


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V for Vendetta

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it's about issues that we're dealing with as ordinary citizens. There are always injustices to fight about, and it's definitely interesting to see what turns a person who's passively living in a flawed society into someone who will try and change things."

On this point, McTeigue is in complete agreement with his star. "[The film] raises issues that need to be raised in this climate," he says, "and lets you make up your own mind about what side of the fence you fall on." Still, whether Warner Bros. was spooked by 7/7 or, as the official line asserts, simply ran out of time to maneuver the film through its truncated schedule, the studio bumped *V* from the figuratively important release date of November 4 (the 5th was the 400th anniversary of the failed Fawkes attack) to March 17. The added stretch did come in handy, allowing for some additional days of shooting in September—not, insists McTeigue, to re-think or even douse provocative elements, but merely to "flesh out parts of Evey's story. Based on those reshoots, I didn't cut anything that [had already been] shot."

What's more, he adds, "London has a history of this stuff. If you take it back to Guy Fawkes or the IRA, I think it's been in London's consciousness for a long time, so [the recent attacks] didn't really make me want to respond. It's the world we live in now. *V* is an interesting film for difficult times."

Matt Mueller is editor-at-large of Total Film magazine.

Lillo Brancato

(Continued from page 95)

in New York City were out for blood. Grieving family members of the slain officer directed their anger at the actor after the *New York Post* ran an interview of a weeping Brancato stating he wished to see Enchautegui's family to apologize. "He has good acting skills. I'm sure he'll put on a good performance at his trial, too," Enchautegui's sister told the paper the following day. Her father went a step further: "If I had the chance, I would like to press the button and watch him get electrocuted. I would keep him alive and press the button two or three times."

Before Brancato's involvement in the crimes committed on the Bronx's Arnow Place, many residents considered *A Bronx*

Tale, though filmed in Queens, a valentine to their borough. An autographed picture of Francis Capra, who portrayed the nine-year-old version of Brancato's character, hangs in a local barber shop. In a strange twist, Daniel Enchautegui lived in the same building where Capra, who is now a regular on the TV series *Veronica Mars*, once resided.

"It seems like everyone in the world has seen *A Bronx Tale*," says Ashman. "Cops really love that movie—they always stopped him to talk about it. He's always been incredibly respectful to policeman. I think he admires them. That's why this makes no sense. He'd never hurt anybody. If you knew him, you'd know he's not that kind of person."

Ashman says he was "blown away" when he heard about the murder. "It was shocking," he says. "Would it have shocked me to hear it was some drug thing? No. But for him to be involved with anyone who could actually kill somebody, or even hurt somebody, was a major shock to me."

Mel Sachs is confident that his client, who now awaits trial while at Riker's Island prison, will be acquitted. Describing Brancato as heartbroken, in pain both physically and emotionally, he recognizes that his client's famous past could either help or hinder him in front of a jury. "Celebrity always has an effect on cases. Sometimes it's positive and sometimes it's a negative, but it does influence. However, if a jury focuses on the facts, whether or not he's a celebrity, [they'll see] that he unfortunately got caught up in this situation but that he is not criminally responsible."

"He was stupid to be in that situation," Ashman says flatly. "He has a problem and probably because of that problem he had a lapse in judgment as far as the people he associated with—that night being an obvious example. He might be guilty of doing stupid things and hurting himself, but he would never hurt anyone. He's always been a good-hearted kid. This whole thing has been very upsetting. He's someone who is so good—he could do anything. This is really a life lesson; you gotta be careful and be aware of what you're doing."

The final scene of *A Bronx Tale* also closes with a life lesson. Lillo Brancato's raspy voice intones the closing words that, in retrospect, seem particularly poignant. "I learned the greatest gift of all," he says. "The saddest thing in life is wasted talent and the choices that you make will shape your life forever. But you can ask anyone from my neighborhood, and they'll just tell you this is just another Bronx tale."

Sara Vilkomerson is a reporter at *The New York Observer*.