



RESURRECTION MAN?

Revenge drama *Edge Of Darkness* marks Mel Gibson's return from the abyss. But has he lost his passion?

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Mel on a mission: as Thomas Craven in new thriller *Edge Of Darkness*.



When we last had face time with Mel Gibson, he was twirling in a chair in the conference room of his plush Icon Production offices in Santa Monica. Fidgety, nervous, even jumpy, this was a Gibson only six months removed from his drink-fuelled outburst and DUI arrest on the Pacific Coast Highway, and he was clearly feeling chastened. But he wasn't there to be confessional or remorseful — he'd paid penance to Diane Sawyer in a widely-viewed television interview, and was relieved to have something to discuss other than whether Jews really are responsible for all the wars in the world, or whether the phrase "sugar tits" was a regular part of his lexicon. Namely his brilliant Mayan epic *Apocalypto*, Gibson's fourth stab at directing.

During our lengthy chat (which he had *Apocalypto* co-screenwriter Farhad Safinia sit in on, almost as a watchdog to stop him saying things he might regret), Gibson drew parallels between America's crumbling empire and the decline of the Mayans, and his steadfast belief in redemption through violence and suffering (in movies, at least). "Tell me when you've actually come to anything really good without having to go through the shit right before it," he said. "It's just the way the pattern of life is. And you could be complacent and not try to go there and you'll probably have an easier time, but you'll kind of have a boring life. I mean, look, none of us would choose the trials we get; they suck. But once you're there you've just got to keep breathing..."

That tête-à-tête was three years ago and the Aussie star also expressed that, as far as acting was concerned, he had "no burning desire" to do it again. "After 30 years of that stuff," he mused, "there's not a whole lot that's different." And yet here he is, holed up in a suite in New York's Crosby Street Hotel, meeting with *Total Film* in late 2009 to mull over his first starring role since M. Night Shyamalan's alien-invasion thriller *Signs*.

The project is Martin Campbell's conspiracy thriller *Edge Of Darkness*, an adaptation of the 1985 BBC miniseries in which a homicide 'tec uncovers a sinister government plot after his daughter is murdered in front of him, on his own doorstep. It's Mel as we've flocked to see him in the past — dark, brooding, vengeful, the Gibson of *Ransom*, *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon*, only now middle-aged (the actor is now, incredibly, 54) and sporting a Boston accent. So is his belated comeback the result of a dazzling epiphany where he realised what acting really means to him? Er, not exactly. "I just felt like a long enough time had elapsed and I felt like doing it again," he shrugs. "I just thought, 'Well, I'm not really doing anything' so I just kind of dropped back for a while. But it's not really exciting to me. I didn't miss it."

Has anything changed since he was last in front of cameras? "Wow, it's *really* different," Gibson exhales. "I don't know what it is, but it used to mean a lot more. Maybe that sounds like I'm throwing it away... I mean I'll still do the best damn job I can, but it doesn't mean the same thing. I don't know what it is. Maybe I'll get the answer myself one of these days. [Pause] It's male menopause, that's what it is."

He may joke — it's how he diffuses prying interrogation — but it's true that an older, possibly wiser Mel, owner of two Oscars (Best Director and Best Picture for *Braveheart*) and a mountain of *Passion Of The Christ*-garnered loot that he couldn't burn through in several lifetimes, has nothing to prove in his career. He has nothing to satisfy but his own creative curiosity. "What you'd laugh at in 1970 is totally not funny now," he says. "So you're looking for something different, a new way to tell stories." >>

'I'M A BIT LONG IN THE TOOTH FOR MAD MAX 4. YOU NEED SOMEBODY THAT CAN GET AROUND QUICKER'

MEL GIBSON



Darkness is the first hurdle: are moviegoers prepared to wipe their memory slates clean of past offences and re-embrace the erstwhile box-office king? Might, in fact, his unwanted tabloid infamy even catalyse interest, letting us glimpse deeper shadings in his revenge-hunting *Darkness* dad? In short, has Mel been missed?

The talented Mr Gibson: (above) taking charge of *Apocalypto*; (left) in forthcoming indie comedy *The Beaver*.

His directors have missed him. "I was just talking with George Miller the other day – he dropped me a line," reveals Gibson. "You keep in touch with them and see what they're up to." And we all know what Miller's been up to. Presumably, the Aussie director's call wasn't just for old times' sake, but to tap Gibbo up for *Mad Max 4*... "He's making it but not with me," he vouches firmly. "I'm a bit long in the tooth for that. You need somebody that can get around quicker, I'd say."

And, presumably, he's also looking to shift the media lens that's been trained on his personal life over the last few years (he's midway through divorcing his wife of 29 years, mother of seven of his eight children, and due to marry Russian girlfriend Oksana Grigorieva), back to his professional endeavours. "I would never say my interests went away really – it's just different aspects that you exercise. Some of the best advice I was ever given – a long time ago, some guy said, 'You want to make yourself better? Go and dig a ditch.' So a lot of that's been going on: ditch digging, vegetable growing. And I've been turning into a vegetable. So it's great and it's good that it's happening again." Make of that what you will.

Too old for this shit, in other words. Back in early 2007, Gibson told us, "It's a lot more fun to be teller of the stories than merely a component in them." And despite his raiding-party assaults on thesping, he hasn't really changed his tune. "I want to direct more stuff. I like making stories up..." Since our recent chat, it's been revealed that one 'story he made up' – an action-drama called *How I Spent My Summer Vacation* about a career criminal who bonds with a nine-year-old boy in a squalid Mexican prison – will shoot this spring, with Gibson acting but not shouting action.

And talking of strange behaviour, consider this... After he completed *Edge Of Darkness*, Gibson reunited with *Maverick* pal Jodie Foster for the dark indie comedy *The Beaver*, about a man and his hand puppet. "It's an odd concept," admits Gibson, "about a guy who's clinically depressed and finds a ratty old beaver puppet and starts to express himself through this crummy thing. It's a fun idea." What Gibson doesn't say but is tacitly clear is that these are tentative baby steps before he decides how much deeper to plunge back into acting. Hitting multiplexes this month, *Edge Of*

Next up on Mel's directing plate... Vikings, with plans afoot for a period epic about the rapers-and-pillagers starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Mel's sniffed out another uber-violent ancient culture to explore the theme closest to his heart: violence in *any* society. If it comes off, expect Gibson to do with Vikings what he's already done with Scottish freedom fighters, Christ-killers and Mayans – spin them into box-office gold. **TF**

***Edge Of Darkness* opens on 29 January and will be reviewed next issue. *The Beaver* is due later in 2010.**

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