



FROM RUSSIA WITH BLOOD

David Cronenberg and Viggo Mortensen reunite for **Eastern Promises**, a violent study of London's Russian crime gangs...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

EASTERN PROMISES



In focus:
Cronenberg
lensing his
dark crime
thriller.



American, and it's only in an analytical way that they're kind of a matched pair. I can see that the films would make a really interesting double bill, but I wasn't thinking about that at all when I was making them."

From Mortensen's retro-cool suits and shades to the unflinching violence, *Eastern Promises* walks and talks like a conventional gangster movie. But with Cronenberg calling the shots, it gains a more combustible rumbling of sex, violence and power, replete with his familiar themes of identity, body violation and kinky but disturbing sex. The 64-year-old director found himself intrigued by how Britain's multi-culturalism imports customs, codes and nationalist fervour wholesale from other countries, creating hermetically sealed sub-cultures with "arbitrary rules of behaviour". *Eastern Promises* pits an organised-crime family fronted by Armin Mueller-Stahl's outwardly genteel restaurant owner Semyon against a rival gang when his son Kirill (Vincent Cassel) has a scion of the clan's throat slit.

"I liked the textures of all those different cultures," Cronenberg says of the "new" Russian crime culture. "You've got Chechens and Azerbaijanis and Russians and Georgians who have all transplanted themselves to London, and have enmities and hostilities that they've brought with them. But they have an uneasy alliance. It's like criminal globalisation. In order to do business they have to collaborate with each other."

During his research, Knight met with the Metropolitan police's Russian desk and the FBI to explore the criminal brotherhood, the Vory V Zakone (Thieves In Law), who were spawned during Stalin's great purges of the 1930s, when millions of "Bolshevik enemies" were exiled to Siberian labour camps and the first Vory gangs formed. Creating a rigid, hierarchical code that exists to this day (total submission to the laws of criminal life; rejection of all government authority), they flourished in the '70s under Russia's black market economy, then fanned out across the globe when the Soviet Union collapsed. Even today, the Vory concentrate on Russia's prisons to recruit new members and a tribunal system is in place that resolves disputes and punishes violations – usually >>

Eastern *Promises* dips below deceptive surfaces to tear open a vicious criminal underworld that's as fascinating as it is terrifying, rife with sex slavery and life-is-cheap morality and imported from Russia into the seedier reaches of London.

Written by Steve Knight, who previously examined the unseen lives of London immigrants in *Dirty Pretty Things*, it grants David Cronenberg a canvas on which to explore man's banal cruelty and immense capacity for

compassion; the human race's yin and yang, good versus evil. It is, then, a striking companion piece to 2005's award-basted *A History Of Violence...* although Cronenberg insists the similarities didn't strike him until after the fact.

"I can certainly see connections with *History Of Violence* now," says the director, sipping a cappuccino on a warm, sunny day in Toronto. "And when I first approached Viggo about playing Nikolai, one of the things that we discussed was, 'Is this too similar for you to play this kind of role again?' But playing a Russian is very different from playing a middle

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with mutilation or death. (Knight was so shocked by what he discovered, particularly in regards to their sex trafficking, he had to tone it down for the final script.)

Mortensen's Nikolai is a "driver" for the gang, although essentially he's a wily watchdog for the nasty, oppressed Kirill. Into this harsh sphere stumbles Naomi Watts as a half-Russian midwife who saves the baby of a teenage Russian prostitute, but in attempting to trace the dead mother's family uncovers lurid, incriminating revelations in her diary – which Nikolai is sent to retrieve. Mortensen spent six months preparing for the role – astonishing even by his exacting standards. He studied the language, spent weeks travelling around Russia, read Russian authors, and sought out real-life

ex-criminals to school himself in the nuances of disreputable behaviour.

"I met some guys who had backgrounds similar to Nikolai," he says, looking meticulous in dark blue jacket and clipped goatee. "They were a little reticent at first because they feel – and they're right – that movies made outside of Russia depicting Russians are full of clichés. Just like when they have Americans played by Russians in Russian movies – they're kind of silly as well. But I said, 'I'm not out to criticise you, I just want to get it right'. And once they realised that they were helpful."

Cronenberg was no slouch either, driving the creation of a believable sub-culture down to the crystal goblets in Semyon's restaurant and the authentic Russian food cooked for the

Nikolai and two blade-wielding thugs – with Viggo stark bollock naked for the duel's duration. It's a visceral, wince-inducing scene that Cronenberg refused to storyboard ("I never use them – I like the spontaneity you get when you don't") and shot in a swift two days on a set built after their original steambath location decided to renovate its premises.

"Viggo had brought back all his books from Russia," says the director of the fight choreography, "and they're black arts; I mean they're sort of forbidden books. Of course, you can buy anything in Russia – I'm surprised he didn't come back with a missile. But the spetsnaz – the Special Forces – have all these fighting techniques that are extremely brutal and incredibly functional and really nasty. Really nasty."

"I said to the stunt coordinator that this is not going to be a kind of *Bourne* movie with the impressionistic cutting, where you don't see anything," he goes on. "I want to see *everything*."

How did his star find the sauna slap-down? "Slippery, painful, embarrassing," sighs Mortensen, who insists he wasn't "primping in the corner" between takes to yield a more impressive display. "I'd be lying if I said it was just another day's work. But David was very efficient and shot it fast. So that was good: when you get banged up, you want it to be over with. And there were moments where he'd cut and you're sitting there like [splays his arms and legs like he's spreadeagled on his back] and you suddenly become..." The 49-year-old actor trails off into a wry chuckle. "But as long as you keep going, then it's like any other scene. You're just trying to make it work."

The memorable scuffle also shows off Nikolai's tattoo-painted body. In the Vory, tattoos describe what crimes you've committed as well as your rank. They're body art with



Woman in peril: Naomi Watts stumbles into gangsterland.



'MORTENSON SOUGHT OUT REAL-LIFE EX-CRIMS'

film's opulent banquet scene. Away from the borscht and vodka, it was blood, knives and human mutilation that Cronenberg was out to nail, and *Eastern Promises* features a memorable and horrific fight in a London bathhouse between

lethal significance – if you have a tattoo you haven't rightfully earned, you can be killed for it. "There was a phrase I really like that was on my back that said, 'The important thing is to remain human,'" says Mortensen, who managed to silence a restaurant of Russian diners on one occasion, so convincing were his Vory tattoos. "I thought, 'Oh, that's a good motto for this character.' But to the guys I met that had that tattoo, that phrase meant something else: to remain human means to be a man, to have no respect for any authority. To take it like a man... And there's a little of that in Nikolai. He's a guy who knows how to take a beating."

As he displayed in *A History Of Violence*, Mortensen's taut, implacable exterior can convey menace, warmth and tenderness in split-second switches. But in *Eastern Promises* he goes even deeper, hinting at a brutal past that isn't shown but is firmly etched into Nikolai's features. The actor's co-stars were impressed although, with Cassel at least, a bit sceptical at first. "Viggo was very precise and very laid-back," says the Frenchman. "In some scenes, he was just watching me [*Cassel stares ahead with an immobile face*], and I have to say



'RUSSIANS AREN'T ANY MORE VIOLENT THAN THE ENGLISH'

once or twice I felt that maybe he should do a little more. But when you see the movie, the stillness he has really works, so maybe there's something for me to learn from that."

"Viggo blew me away on a daily basis," chimes Watts, who found out she was pregnant three weeks into the shoot (shortly after witnessing a caesarean section in preparation to play Anna). "He spent time in Russia and every day he would come to set with something interesting: a piece of writing or a Russian chocolate or a photo album. I think he stayed in character pretty much the whole time. And that's great. It really helped me... I saw Viggo yesterday for the first time since we finished the film and it was like a whole different person. I almost didn't recognise him."

Giving the man himself the final word, then... "Some people looked at *A History Of Violence* and said, 'This is about America and its role in the world,'" he says. "But I wouldn't say *Eastern Promises* is about Russian violence. I don't think the Russians are any more violent than the English or Americans or anybody else. It's about *human* violence to some degree but in the end, for me, it's a movie about compassion. It's a movie that shows you that no matter how hard things get and how difficult those choices are to make, there are people who will *always* do the right thing." **TF**

Eastern Promises opens on 26 October and is reviewed this issue.

REX, WIREIMAGE

VIGGO MORTENSEN Q&A

That sauna fight scene is painful to watch. Did you worry it might be too visceral?

No. And frankly, the body-count for *A History Of Violence* and this film together is far less than, say, in *The Departed* or the *Bourne* movies. People like to say, "Cronenberg's movies are brutal." But the reason people say that is because those scenes stick with them because they're realistic and you see the consequences. Someone won't get hit 50 times in the face and still be standing.

How worried were you about being naked to shoot that scene, and then seeing it up on the big screen?

Well, it's shot pretty straightforward and you see what you see. We talked about it; it was a brief conversation. He said, "Visually, what do you think about this scene?" I said, "I think it should be as realistic as the rest of the movie." And then we just got down to it. But I knew it would be awkward and vulnerable.

Next year's the US presidential election. Who are you rooting for?

I'm waiting to hear someone sound like they're really sincere and like they're going to do something significant. Because it's gonna take someone who has some guts

to put things back right, not only for the people of the United States but so that the United States can be seen not as an out of control, spoiled-brat bully nation but as a responsible member of the family of nations. I haven't seen that yet.

What's up next?

I'm doing a movie starting at the end of the month [*the Ed Harris-directed western Appaloosa*] and I'm probably going to do another one early next year. And I have a couple of exhibitions for next year, so I'm pretty busy. In fact, I've got too much work to do right now. I could do with a little less, frankly.

Matt Mueller