

Why fear is the key

Oscar-worthy performances propel a film about a jazz drummer and his brutal mentor, says **Andrew Mueller**

Write what you know” is advice dished out to wannabe novelists and screenwriters, and Damien Chazelle took it to heart with his second feature, *Whiplash*, a sadomasochistic battle of wills between a gifted jazz-drummer student with visions of greatness (Miles Teller) and his cruel, manipulative teacher (JK Simmons). Immersed for four years in the hypercompetitive jazz-band world depicted in *Whiplash*, albeit at a New Jersey high school, rather than a Juilliard-style conservatory, the 29-year-old film-maker also found himself at the mercy of an unrelenting whip-cracker like *Whiplash*'s Fletcher. That's an alarming prospect for anyone who sees the film.

If Chazelle's real-life Fletcher wasn't as abusive as Simmons's rehearsal-room martinet, he was a fear-monger all the same: “I became a much better drummer than I ever would have been because I was motivated by fear.” Had this man been alive to witness his terror-inducing methodology translated into cinematic terms (Chazelle says he passed away years ago), he might feel proud of his achievement.

It's *Whiplash*'s moral bait: can you be a creative genius without a measure of disciplinarian brutality?

If some tyrant hadn't hurled a cymbal at Charlie Parker's head (the apocryphal tale Fletcher uses to justify his brutality), would he have become the greatest jazz soloist ever? “Conditioning is a huge part of becoming an artist,” Chazelle argues when we meet at a London hotel. “This idea of the prodigy who is born that way is, um...” Bollocks? “I was gonna say bullshit, but that works. Complete bollocks. It's this totally bogus romantic, mythic fantasy.”

A spirited mash-up that's as much action-blast thriller as it is musical drama, written and directed with a precision that can only be called musical, *Whiplash* is highly accomplished — you could almost say prodigious. In Chazelle's hands, jazz drumming looks thrillingly visceral. He is aided by his baby-faced star's vulnerable turn as Andrew. Teller appears lost in a trance-like state during the intensive drumming sequences, a by-product, the actor insists, of “just trying to play all those drums”. If Chazelle sees *Whiplash* as “the story of a kid being moulded by a psycho”, Teller tells me he views Andrew as a psycho, too. This prompts Chazelle to declare: “It's the story of two people who realise they deserve each other.”

Chazelle was halfway through his white-knuckle-ride script when he saw Teller's film debut, *Rabbit Hole*, and finished writing with him in mind. Simmons was the suggestion of a more benevolent

mentor, Jason Reitman, who has cast the veteran character actor in several of his own films, and god-fathered *Whiplash* through the briar patches of cash-raising and creative gridlock. “Any time we risked losing our way, Jason steered us back,” Chazelle says.

Convincing others required first making an 18-minute short, shooting Andrew's initial rehearsal with Fletcher's band. (Face slaps are involved.) It starred two Simmonses (JK and a young actor named Johnny), but no Teller, who was in Chicago shooting *Divergent*. The short won a Sundance jury prize and squeezed enough cash out of investors to fund a brisk 19-day shoot. Two days were dedicated to *Whiplash*'s climactic on-stage face-off, in which Andrew achieves a Pyrrhic victory via a frenetic drum solo. It's an exhilarating, kinetic, somewhat triumphalist finale, which wasn't Chazelle's intention. “I didn't expect some to deem it ‘a feelgood movie’,” he says, frowning. “That wasn't necessarily on the page.”

Simmons and Teller both brought skills to the table, the former having earned a degree in classical conducting, the latter banging away on a drum kit purchased for him when he was 15. Neither had much of a clue about jazz, though. In fact, Teller's experience wasn't terribly useful — he had to retrain intensively before the shoot, even to hold his drumsticks the correct way. Yet their performances remain strongly believable.

“If I'd never played the drums, I would have had a hard time, because I have a high bullshit-ometer,” says Teller, whose hands are truly blistered and bloodied on screen. “But that's a skill you develop, knowing in the back of your head that you're a shitty

to forging a creative genius



He bangs the drums Miles Teller, left, as Andrew, and JK Simmons as his teacher, Fletcher, in *Whiplash*

drummer while having to appear that you're great. Allowing yourself to bullshit yourself."

Teller would love to make intense dramas his calling card, having asked his agent to stop sending him scripts about "the kid with the girl, the kid with the buddies" (as in *Footloose*, *Project X* and *The Spectacular Now*). Proudly informing me that he was up at 5am that morning training for his next role as the boxer Vinny Pazienza, the 27-year-old says: "I've always liked in-your-face stuff. In college, I wanted to play intense scenes — I didn't want to do two people having coffee, talking about their sex lives."

Chazelle, who gave him Raging Bull to watch and a Yamaha drum kit to practise on, compares Teller to a young Dustin Hoffman or Gene Hackman, 1970s trend-shifters with interestingly lumpy faces and imperfect physicality. "You don't have faces like that in American cinema any more, except for Miles."

On set, the two actors stepped away from their on-camera pugnacity as soon as Chazelle called cut. Teller notes drily: "If JK was in character the whole time, that would have been oppressive." Yet Simmons says: "We were like two guys on the high-school football team giving each other shit in the locker room. Just macho

bullshit banter, which Miles is very clever at... He would try to reassert the masculinity that I had stripped off him during the take."

While Teller gives Andrew's rage full voice, the intense ferocity Simmons feeds into Fletcher is terrifying. However pure his love of jazz, Fletcher would be equally suited to waterboarding duty at Guantanamo Bay.

Though he is mainly known for hangdog good guys, Simmons has done bastards before — but nothing can prepare you for Fletcher. If he doesn't bag the best supporting actor Oscar in February, we'll bang a drum in protest, although the 59-year-old is staying modest.

"I was just channelling Damien's words," he says.

The art of the soul-crushing insult gains a new lease of life in Fletcher's offensive rants. One of Chazelle's favourites was a Simmons flub: "I'll f***you like a pig" instead of "I'll gut you like a pig". Simmons wanted it lopped from the final cut; Chazelle left it in. And, while they're buddy-buddy in the flesh, perhaps there's mischievousness in the actor insinuating a psychosexual attraction at the heart of the Andrew-Fletcher relationship. There's definitely an S&M thing going on — purposefully, Chazelle acknowledges. "It's not just that Miles gets abused and is upset about it, it's that he comes back for seconds. He's happy being in this room where he's treated like an utter piece of shit. I can identify with that."

It turns out, intriguingly, that the character Chazelle holds most contempt for is Andrew's father, a seemingly harmless, benevolent figure played by Paul Reiser, who believes he's being helpful when he tells his son: "You can always do something else."

"I don't think he's truly supportive of his son, because I don't think he truly believes in the talent his son has," he says. "If you're left with the choice of everyone in your life seeing you as average, or one person seeing a potential greatness in you, but that person happens to be a sadistic asshole, it's actually a choice to be made. If I put myself in those shoes, I have to sympathise with the choices that Andrew makes." □

Whiplash is in cinemas from Jan 16