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## John Carpenter Tribute at the Aero Theater: "Escape from New York" & "Escape from LA"

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The Famed Director Discusses the Adventures of Snake Plissken



**Ben Kenber**, Yahoo! Contributor Network  
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### Death Wish

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"Escape Artist: A Tribute to John Carpenter" continued Saturday night with the exploits of Snake Plissken who appeared in the double feature "Escape From New York" and "Escape From LA." This again brought the fans out in droves as the Aero Theater in Santa Monica was packed, and the emcee again welcomed us to a showing of "The Happening 2." He said it was a first in that he would show us the M. Night Shyamalan sequel before it was even made.

These films marked a few of the collaborations between director John Carpenter and actor Kurt Russell. The two first worked together on the TV movie "Elvis," and they quickly became great friends. They went on to work on other films including another big cult hit, "Big Trouble In Little China." "Escape From LA" remains the only sequel that John Carpenter has ever directed, and this came about because Kurt Russell desperately wanted to play the character again. Of all the roles he has played, Kurt said that this was the only role that he wanted to play again.

The emcee warned us that the print of "Escape From New York" was pretty faded, and that it was an original print and the only one they could get their hands on. This was being pretty generous as the print looked like it had been slaughtered by countless film projectors, and the color was almost completely faded. Green scratches were all over the print, and it was a huge shock that the film didn't break apart in the projector. Still, despite the print itself, people were still enjoying a film that they have seen hundreds of times. They laughed when the title of "1997 NOW" came up, and when Lee Van Cleef speaks into this huge ass cell phone that we would never see anyone carrying around today. Another character that got a humorous response was Romero played by Frank Doubleday, and he remains one of the truly strangest characters to come out of any film I have ever seen.

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After "Escape From New York" ended and the end credits were all done, John Carpenter again made his entrance to the front of the theater to another thunderous standing ovation. The discussion was led by a critic from the website Bloody Disgusting, and he started off with the genesis of the project. Carpenter quickly acknowledged the crowd by saying:

"Thank you for coming out to see the movie tonight, but I gotta tell ya, this is the worst fucking print of any movie I have ever seen. There's practically no

color in the film! It's all pink!"

The audience laughed loudly in complete agreement. Movie prints don't get much worse than what we saw before Carpenter appeared.

The director talked about writing the script back in the early 1970's when there was a great sense of cynicism in the country about our President, and also in response to the hostage crisis in [Iran](#) at that time. John also admitted that he was inspired by two of his favorite movies back then, "Dirty Harry" and "Death Wish" (this would explain Kurt Russell's delivery of his dialogue in both movies). Those two movies involved two men who were driven to the brink emotionally, and who take it upon themselves to take vengeance on those who have wronged them. Like those characters, Snake Plissken gets the job done, and this brought a lot of satisfaction to audiences that have been exposed to the movie as no one else seemed to be accomplishing anything.

Carpenter said that he initially wanted Dirty Harry himself, Clint Eastwood, to play the role of Snake Plissken. For one reason or another, it did not work out. In fact, Carpenter had shopped this screenplay around to several studios, and they had all rejected it. Fortunately, he had a multiple picture deal at the time with Avco Embassy which had also produced another movie of his, "The Fog." Ironically, the studio wanted Charles Bronson (the star of "Death Wish") for the title role. Somehow, everything came together when former child star Kurt Russell came on board to play Snake Plissken. Kurt portrayed Snake as a very asexual human being who cares about nothing more than staying alive. In the process, he created one of the most memorable anti-heroes the movie world has ever seen.

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John also talked a bit about Lee Van Cleef, a favorite of his from the Sergio Leone westerns of the past, who played Police Commissioner Bob Hauk. Apparently, at the time this movie was made, Lee had seriously injured his knee during the filming of another movie and had never gotten it fixed. As a result, he was in constant pain from it during the shoot. Lee's wife was there during the shoot, and she was there whenever Lee had to walk in a scene as he was in constant pain from his leg throughout the shoot. This is interesting because you would never notice this from watching the

movie.

With a budget of only \$5 million dollars, "Escape From New York" needed to be filmed as quickly as possible. Carpenter said in the past that the rule of low budget filmmaking was to spend as little as possible, and to shoot as much as you can. In point of fact, there is only one real shot of New York in the entire movie. It features the Statue of Liberty, and it pans from the set there and dissolves into the set they had in Los Angeles. A lot of what you see of New York in the movie are actually matte paintings done by artists from Roger Corman's New World Pictures (among those artists was future director James Cameron). Much of downtown New York was actually filmed in downtown [St. Louis](#) which had a huge fire that had destroyed several city blocks. The city let Carpenter and his crew film there in triple digit temperatures, and they even shut the power down for them when they filmed the movie at night.

Whereas Carpenter and company had only \$5 million to make "Escape From New York," Paramount Pictures gave him and Debra Hill over \$50 million to make "Escape From LA." They had more time to film the movie and more money. However, John said that he had the hardest time writing the script for the movie because he said that everything that he was writing was "bullshit." What got him into doing it was that Kurt was so keen on playing the character again, so they solved their script problem by moving the action of the story to Los Angeles, which is in a constant state of denial with all the [earthquakes](#) and natural disasters going on over there. They simply took the same scenario of the original and updated it to reflect the current state of the city when they were filming.

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"Escape From New York" may have had only one real New York shot in the entire movie, but all of "Escape From LA" was in fact filmed in Los Angeles. The sequel was shot over a period of 103 nights, and Carpenter said that he found that to be very "soul draining." Filming at night he said changes the way you see things, and the darkness infects you in a way that is not at all healthy.

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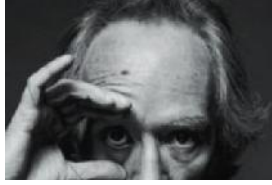


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At one point, John said that he was suffering from a cold and was about to lose his voice he felt, so he wanted to open up to questions from the audience. The previous night, John had brought up that "Masters of Horror" has now morphed into the new [NBC](#) show, "Fear Itself." It turns out that he was actually set to direct an episode of the show with a script that he said was great and which was written by friends of his. But at some point along the way, Mick Garris (the executive producer of the show) was fired. John said that Mick was really the only real reason why he had agreed to do the show in the first place. When Mick was no longer involved, John basically said fuck it.

One person had brought up that at one point, it looked like John and Kurt might possibly doing a third Escape movie called, "Escape From Earth." This never panned out in part because "Escape From LA" unfortunately bombed at the box office. There also was at some point to be a video game based on the movies, but the company involved with it ended up going back to the past by resurrecting Pac-Man among other games. There was even talk of doing a TV series that would act as a prequel to the movies, and that there would even be an anime movie chronicling the future adventures of Snake Plissken, and that never seemed to materialize either. Despite the box office failure of "Escape From LA," many out there are still intent on continuing the exploits of their favorite antihero.

Of course, like many movies of the past, "Escape From New York" is being groomed for a remake which will feature more bang for your buck. John said that New Line Cinema had bought the rights to the remake, but has since "tanked." So right now, he has no involvement with it, other than the fact that the studio will have to pay him a lot of money assuming they ever get around to making it. According to reports, Len Wiseman was set to direct the remake with "300" star Gerard Butler set to play Snake Plissken. Both of them have since dropped out of the project, and according to IMDB, "Terminator 3" director Jonathan Mostow is now set to direct it.

John Carpenter right now seems content to sit at home and watch the [NBA](#) Finals or play video games. He announced that he had just finished playing "Ninja Gaiden 2," and that he would be moving on to "Metal Gear Solid 4" next. It doesn't seem like he is in a big hurry to direct another movie right now,

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unless of course the studios pay him A LOT of money. The business seems to keep changing on John, and he does not appear to be as enthusiastic about making films as he once was. Hopefully he will make another movie at some point.

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The director ended up closing out the evening by saying that he had to go meet with his drug dealer. Before he left the stage, the moderator gave him a gift saying that John had given so much to us that he wanted to give back to him. John ended up getting the "Escape From New York" board game which is apparently the most complicated board game ever. After the discussion was over, he did take some time outside of the theater to sign autographs and pose for pictures with fans who told him that he had been an inspiration to him. If you look at movies of recent years, you will see that

John Carpenter has indeed inspired many people who are now copying him or paying homage to him. To this day, he remains one of the important directors of the sci-fi and horror genre, and that will never go away. For our generation, he is indeed our Howard Hawks.

As the evening wore on, many came back inside the theater to watch "Escape From LA." The print for this movie was in much better condition, but that didn't stop it from breaking down during the very last seconds of the movie. Snake Plissken may have shut down a lot of things, but who would have thought that he would have shut down our movie theater?

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