

SPOTLIGHTS

MOVIES/TV

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// Why Snooki Changed Her Mind About Becoming a WWE Diva

POLITICS

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MMA

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Scene Anatomy 101: Escape from New York

Posted by George H. Sirois on 06.06.2007

Do we really need to know what happened to Fresno Bob?



On March 12 of this year, Variety posted an article stating that New Line Cinema has acquired the rights to distribute a film produced by Neal Moritz (*The Fast and the Furious*) and starring Gerard Butler (*300*). This created a great amount of controversy around the internet. Film fans were up in arms and Kurt Russell winced talking about it during an interview with Entertainment Weekly.

Why is this movie getting so much negative attention? Well, would it surprise you if I told you that New Line intends to release a remake to theaters? It's not just a remake, but a remake to a 1981 film that has gained a tremendous cult following. This film was made on a \$7 million budget and made the most of its small amount of money, giving it a unique look and charm that stands the test of time. It was directed and co-written by John Carpenter, a man who just three years before, re-invented the horror genre by creating the character of Michael Myers in *Halloween*.

After the success of *Halloween*, Carpenter pulled out an old script for a science-fiction / action film that was also a western. Well, it wasn't set in the Old West or anything, but the main character was someone with a very obscure past and is sent into a very dangerous town to save the day. When the script was greenlit, Carpenter brought in a former Disney actor named Kurt Russell and together, the two of them created one of the most iconic anti-heroes in film history: Snake Plissken. The film that made Snake Plissken and Kurt Russell famous:

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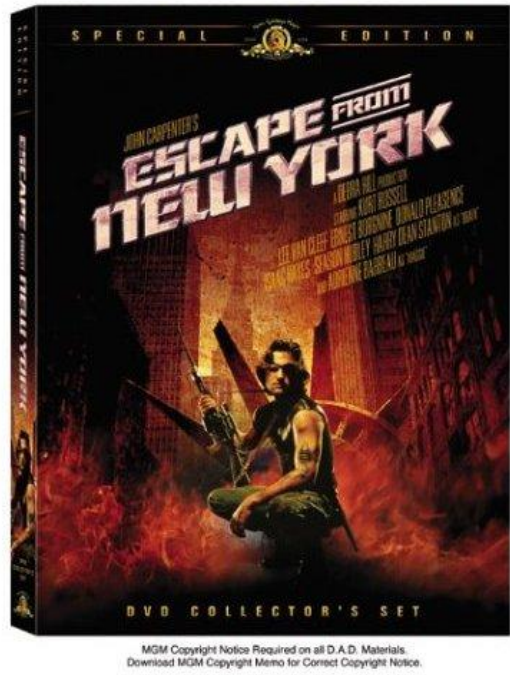
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There's a very basic plot to this film, which leaves Carpenter and co-writer Nick Castle plenty of time to explore the strange landscape and characters that populate the burned out New York City. Here's a quick rundown of what happened, according to the opening narration. In 1988, the crime in the United States rose 400 percent. To accommodate all of the captured criminals, the island of Manhattan has been sealed off from the rest of the country and turned into the world's largest maximum security prison. The United States Police Force, like an army, keeps watch over every border. The bridges are mined, the rivers are patrolled. The rules are simple: once you go in, you don't come out.

Now, in the year 1997, the President of the United States (Donald Pleasence) is flying to a summit when Air Force One is hijacked by a terrorist that aims the plane at one of the buildings in New York. The President gets out with the help of his emergency escape pod just as the plane crashes, and as soon as he lands, he is kidnapped by a group of thugs and delivered to the top dog in the city: The Duke of New York (Isaac Hayes).

The only course of action that the United States Police Force sees is to recruit a newly convicted thief named Snake Plissken to go into the city, find the President and get him out alive for his summit. Fortunately for them, Plissken's not an ordinary convict. He's a war hero, a recipient of two purple hearts, and the youngest man to be decorated by the President. To keep him in line, the Commissioner of the US Police

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Force Bob Hauk (Lee Van Cleef) has two capsules injected into Plissken that detonate a lethal charge after 24 hours. If Snake can succeed in his mission, he'll get a full pardon for every crime he's ever committed in the USA.

Snake goes into the city and immediately encounters a strange array of characters that left their old lives – and even their own names – behind when they were sent to New York. After he is spotted in a theater by a cabbie named, well, Cabbie (Ernest Borgnine) – he's the first in the film to say the now-famous line: "I heard you were dead" – he is given some shelter by a girl in a Chock-Full-of-Nuts store (good thing she was there too since her character's name is "Girl in Chock-Full-of-Nuts"), gets past a gang of nutjobs that look like they're left behind from *The Warriors*, and is eventually rescued by Cabbie.

Cabbie offers Snake a ride to get what he needs, and what he needs is information about the President. Cabbie immediately tells Snake that the Duke's got the President, so Snake tells him he wants to meet him. Cabbie tells him that nobody sees the Duke, so instead he takes him to "Brain," the smartest man in the city. Cabbie parks in an alley, then gets out and the two of them walk towards a very familiar looking building on 42nd Street and 5th Avenue.

CABBIE: I hate to leave her on the street. Usually I don't leave her alone at all. But you're a special case, Snake.

Cabbie bangs on the front door of the building.

CABBIE: It's okay, Snake. It's a better neighborhood. You can relax.

Snake checks the timer on his wrist. He has 17 hours to find the President or he dies.

SNAKE: Thanks.

CABBIE: Boy, they got a great place here. Like a fortress.

SNAKE: They?

CABBIE: Yeah.

We suddenly hear someone yelling from the other side of the door. It's a woman, one that we'll come to know as Maggie (Adrienne Barbeau).

MAGGIE: Who is it?

CABBIE: It's me.

MAGGIE: Who's me?

CABBIE: Cabbie.

MAGGIE: What do you want?

CABBIE: Somebody wants to see Brain. It's important.

MAGGIE: Go away, Cabbie!

CABBIE: No, it's Snake! Snake Plissken.

Snake's name has gotten around quite a bit in the past several years. Maggie slowly opens up the door and looks at Snake. She doesn't look too impressed.

MAGGIE: You're Plissken?

CABBIE: He wants to see Brain.

MAGGIE: Why?

Snake slowly steps forward and gives his answer. The way Snake responds is in the exact same fashion that Clint Eastwood would have answered as "The Man with No Name," another hint that John Carpenter always looked at this film as a western at heart.

SNAKE: I wanna meet the Duke.

Maggie opens the door and Cabbie and Snake walk inside. Cabbie is talking Snake's ear off as they descend down the stairs.

CABBIE: Hey, you remember this place, Snake? It used to be the public library. Oh, that Brain. He's the greatest. Mr. Fabulous! The Duke loves him.

Snake motions towards Maggie, who's walking further away from the two.

SNAKE: Who's that?

CABBIE: That's Maggie, Brain's squeeze. The Duke gave her to Brain just to keep him happy. See what I mean?

Snake and Cabbie catch up with Maggie. She doesn't even look back to acknowledge him, but instead she says something that Snake had to be tired of hearing by now.

MAGGIE: Heard you were dead.

Maggie, Snake and Cabbie walk into the main room. A man is sitting by himself in the corner of the room. This is Brain (Harry Dean Stanton).

MAGGIE: Brain?

CABBIE: Brain, I brought somebody to see you.

Snake walks closer to Brain. He immediately recognizes him, but not under his current nickname.

SNAKE: Harold Helman.

Brain immediately realizes who is in front of him and a chill goes up his spine.

BRAIN: Snake?

Maggie looks at Brain, confused.

MAGGIE: Harold?

Snake almost cracks a smile as he walks closer to Brain.

SNAKE: How you been, Harold? It's been a long time.

MAGGIE: You never told me you knew Snake Plissken, Brain.

Cabbie immediately interrupts. He can tell the situation is getting a little tense and tries to change the subject.

CABBIE: Isn't that great? Hey, Brain, I could use some gas if you could spare some.

But Snake's not finished talking. He feels the urge to remind Brain of what he was before crossing the border into New York City.

SNAKE: I'm glad you remember me. Yeah. A man should remember his past. Kansas City, four years ago, you ran out on me. You left me sitting there.

Brain shrugs off his accusation.

BRAIN: You were late.

SNAKE: We were buddies, Harold. You, me, and Fresno Bob. You know what they did to Bob?

Now, Carpenter and Castle didn't have to mention anyone named "Fresno Bob," but it was a great decision on their part to do so since it hints at Plissken's past without diving too far into it. Remember, this is not the story of Snake, Brain and Fresno Bob in Kansas City; it doesn't matter what happened back then and it sure as hell doesn't matter what happened to Fresno Bob. The fact that you want to know shows that you're invested in the character of Snake Plissken, and you care about him succeeding in his mission.

Snake shoves the barrel of his gun in Brain's face and yells towards Maggie.

SNAKE: You wanna see him sprayed all over that map, baby? Where's the President?!

Brain puts his hands up and yells at his old partner and possible killer.

BRAIN: Swear to God, Snake! I don't know!

SNAKE: Don't fuck with me!

Brain relaxes for a moment. He's been with Snake long enough to know that as long as he knows who has the information for what he needs, he won't just kill him.

BRAIN: Why do you wanna know?

SNAKE: I want him.

Believing he has the upper hand – for now – Brain starts to taunt Snake, maybe get a rise out of him.

BRAIN: Working for the man now?

Snake takes a step back and motions towards Maggie.

SNAKE: Then I'll just beat it out of your squeeze.

Now Brain knows Snake's bluffing.

BRAIN: Maggie doesn't know exactly where he is, and unless you know exactly, precisely where he is, you'll never find him.

Snake pauses for a moment, trying to come up with something else. Then it hits him. He has what can help them perched on top of one of the buildings there.

SNAKE: Listen, I'll take you out of here. Yeah. Jet glider just a couple of blocks down the street. And all you gotta do is get me to him.

Cabbie immediately jumps at this opportunity.

CABBIE: No kidding? On the level? Hey, will you take me too?

But Brain's still not willing to make a deal with Snake.

BRAIN: We got a deal somewhere else.

SNAKE: No glider.

MAGGIE: We've got the President. And the Duke's taking everybody out of here.

SNAKE: Never happen, baby. You see, I know something you and the Duke don't know. Only got so long before Mr. President doesn't mean a whole lot.

Now Snake finally has one up on Brain. There's no way they could know about the summit hearing that the President's was on his way to attend. And there's definitely no way they could know the significance of the cassette tape that the President has in his possession.

Brain still doesn't believe him, but Maggie's starting to come around. Cabbie's staying put where he is.

BRAIN: You're lying.

MAGGIE: Maybe he's not.

BRAIN: I know him. Look at his face, he's lying!

SNAKE: Right, Harold. I'm lying. So I might as well have some fun and keep looking by myself.

Enough of the crap. Snake cocks his gun again and aims it right at Brain's head. He knows with just a little extra push, Maggie and Cabbie can get Brain to help him.

MAGGIE: Brain!

SNAKE: Talk to him, baby.

MAGGIE: Brain, he'll kill us both!

CABBIE: Brain, you gotta tell him!

BRAIN: All right, all right!

Mission accomplished. Snake lowers his gun and nods.

SNAKE: You always were smart, Harold.

But of course, Brain just has to have the last word on the matter.

BRAIN: Just one thing right now. Don't call me Harold.

This scene is a very significant one since, from here on, we get to see a very strange partnership between these four characters. While Snake presses on to succeed in his mission – since failure would mean his own death – Cabbie brags about how they're going to do a good job now that they're with Snake and then drives off in his cab. Brain gives Snake the information he needs to find the President, then quickly turns on him and joins up with the Duke of New York again. And Maggie's caught in the middle since all she wants is to get out of the city and into the country again. Everyone's doing what they feel will get them out of New York at that moment. What other motive do they need since they're all criminals? Even Snake's a criminal; he just happens to be the one that's been picked out to accomplish this mission.

It's a constant device that John Carpenter used throughout the film to keep the audience on its toes. He introduced characters and made them seem significant only to kill them two minutes later. He had Brain and Cabbie say they're with Snake, then either run off or switch sides to go back to The Duke. Even Snake says to Hawk at the beginning of the film, "Call me Snake." Then, at the end when Hawk calls him Snake, he responds, "The name's Plissken." This is just one of the many different elements that made this film what it is, and it's something that we just don't see much of anymore.

What really bothers me about the remake that's being put together for *Escape from New York* is how this is going to be half-prequel and half-remake, just like what Rob Zombie is doing for *Halloween*. Now, this is just my opinion, but there are some characters that we shouldn't know too much about and both Michael Myers and Snake Plissken are two of them. The only things we know about Plissken are his military record and his police record. That should be it. He's played by Kurt Russell as Clint Eastwood's "Man With No Name" for a reason. He's a legend in New York, respected by most of the top thugs in the city and looked at as a threat by The Duke.

That's not what we'd be getting in the remake. Just like Michael Bay's production company felt the urge to explain Leatherface's backstory to us, New Line wants to tell us... what, exactly? How he transitioned from a hero to a criminal? Why should we have to know about that? The title of the movie is *Escape from New York*, not *Snake Plissken*. Snake just happens to be the guy doing the escaping.

Are they going to tell us why he wears the eyepatch? Or what happened to Fresno Bob? Or how he got arrested and sent to New York? Why should we have to know this? Snake's greatest asset is the element of mystery. We shouldn't have everything spoon-fed to us the way the industry insists on doing these days. Let us use our imagination just as John Carpenter did back then when he had only a \$7 million budget and used some burned out streets of St. Louis as his New York City.

These films that were made 20-30 years ago had something special in them, and *Escape from New York* is one of those films. It was different, it was fun, it had weird characters and odd situations and it had a hero in the center of it that you didn't know anything about, yet grew to like anyway. It doesn't matter what Snake did in the past, how he grew up, how he lost his eye or what pushed him into being a criminal. All that matters is that he's got a job to do, and he's gonna get it done whatever it takes.

Oh, and sixteen years later, he's gonna go to L.A. and do it all over again.

Until next week, Class Dismissed!

– George H. Sirois

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