

Opening “THE BOOK OF ELI”: Part Two

Written by Chris Haberman
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As the New Mexico desert dust continues to furiously swarm the set of the Hughes Brothers' THE BOOK OF ELI (out on DVD and Blu-ray from Warner Home Video June 15; see the first part of this report [here](#)), the chance to interview the film's stars comes slowly but surely. Stationed in a huge tent rigged up for the cast and crew to eat lunch in, the gaggle of journalists here to visit the set are left to fend for themselves while the others go back to work.

After chatting with Gary Oldman, who plays ELI's chief villain Carnegie, we're told to sit tight and wait for his co-stars to break away to answer our inquiries. The trouble is, it's scary in here. The winds outside are strong enough to support you if you simply turn around and lean against it with all of your weight, like leaning against an invisible wall. And the huge circus-esque tent is bloated with that wind, wobbling and rattling like a pissed-off hot-air balloon that doesn't understand why it cannot take flight. When one of the folding tables to one side crashes to the ground, unable to withstand the wind's pressure anymore, the other journalists' body language makes it clear that this writer isn't the only one wondering how much longer we'll be kept cooped up in here, waiting for the sandstorm's next rascally act.



Ray Stevenson, whom genre fans know best as the screen's third incarnation of Marvel Comics' Punisher, is next to arrive to discuss his character, Redridge, whom the actor accurately describes as “Carnegie's attack dog.” We had previously seen footage of Stevenson walking calmly toward a house in which Eli (Denzel Washington) and company are hiding, toting a rocket launcher. As though Redridge has done this a thousand times before, he raises the launcher and mimes a blast right into the house. Decked out in a military flight jumpsuit his character wears for “functionality,” Stevenson delves into the scarred Redridge's rocky past, and whether or not he should be considered ex-military: “Uh, no. We're setting this one 30 years

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after some sort of nuclear holocaust, and he would’ve been a child then—hence the burn on the side of the face right there [*motions to a prosthetic scar*]. There would’ve been no military to join... This is what he does, this is what he knows—he knows no other, he knows no different.”

Sounding as rugged as his character, Stevenson says he’s been toughing out the intimidating weather. “Days like this, you just gotta get through it,” he shrugs. “You know, there’s no point in moping around and stuff like that. Where else do you wanna be? On a movie set or somewhere else?”

BOOK OF ELI leading lady Mila Kunis pays the catering tent a visit after Stevenson, looking little worse for wear. Despite some pretty dirty hair (there may only be one hotel-size bottle of shampoo on the planet, and it belongs to Carnegie) and a few cuts and scrapes on her face, she’s still quite striking. She sets up her role of Solara, explaining, “Gary Oldman plays Solara’s stepdad, Jennifer Beals plays my mother. Denzel comes to town, and you know—it’s a young girl inspired by [him] who wants to know more about the world and runs away with him—she follows him. If anything, she just really believes in him.”



Since Solara’s relationship with her stepfather is less than loving, Kunis also believes her character sees the noble Eli as a “father figure” who “opens her eyes up to a whole new world.” Fango asks if playing Solara’s progression from doe-eyed youngster to efficient ass-kicker has been fun, and Kunis confirms, “Yeah! She starts off really naïve, and halfway through the movie, by default, she has absolutely no choice but to toughen up. She’s not a stupid girl; if anything, she’s a really strong female and just wants to observe and absorb everything that life has to offer.”

Eventually, the weather decides that today’s shooting is finished, and the winds kick up enough to shut down production before we can have a few moments with Eli himself. Fortunately, Washington is gracious enough to consent to a phone interview later. Since Eli is introduced in

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the film as a fellow quite fond of his still-functioning iPod, Fango asks if Washington listened to any particular music to inspire his performance as the sword-swinging warrior. “Allan [Hughes] seems to be more of the sound guy and [brother] Albert is more of the visual guy, so Allan put together some sounds, like some Nine Inch Nails kind of stuff. My son, who is also involved in the film as an associate producer, came up with some music—he was sending stuff back and forth. In fact, he convinced Allan and I to use—what is it?—“Aqueous Transmission” by Incubus. So I think Allan likes the idea of sounds more than just music.”

Fango also wonders if ELI’s intense physical aspects are some of the most, if not *the* most, challenging of Washington’s career. “Um, no—I did a boxing movie called THE HURRICANE, so that was equally demanding, although I only boxed one guy at a time,” the actor explains. “There’s one scene in [ELI] where I fight about six guys, and another where I fight, I believe, 16 guys, and we did it all in one shot. But I’m fortunate, number one, to work with some of the top stunt/fight guys—like Jeff Imada, who was trained under one of the true masters of martial arts, Dan Inosanto. Dan and Bruce Lee came up together, and Jeff was Dan’s disciple. We started working a good, I don’t know, five or six months ago, and I’ve been boxing for 15 years, so I was able to bring my boxing skills to the martial arts/swordplay stuff. It was a challenge, but it was a lot of fun—I enjoy it.”

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