





## On The Set Of **La Linea**

words by Brandon Maxwell  
photos by Robert Todd Williamson

The federal agent was our only protection against the shotguns blasting from the opposite end of the parking lot. As the agent backed toward us, his MP5 submachine gun laid down controlled three-round bursts this way then that, effectively pinning-down a dozen Mexican Mafiosos behind their SUVs. Spent shell casings rained from the weapon's ejection port. Golden hot brass landed all around us, that beautiful tink-a-tink sound belying the terror of the moment.

"Cut!" cries the assistant director. But with thirteen armed actors on-set, it takes a few moments for the gunfire to cease. It's the last day of filming on *La Linea*, and we've been invited for a first-look. *La Linea* is 'The Line,' the Tijuana border crossing where much of Mexico's drugs are smuggled into the US.

This started out as a small independent film about a hitman hired by the CIA to take out the kingpin behind it all. But with actors like Ray Liotta, Esai Morales, Andy Garcia, Bruce Davison, Armand Assante, and Danny Trejo on board, small gets mighty big mighty fast. Esai, Bruce, and Danny are on-set today, and the film's director and writer are excited to give us the inside dope, as it were, on the project.

Looking uncharacteristically dapper for a writer/producer, r. ellis frazier prefers his name spelled lower-case and lights up when asked what inspired the film. "I lived in Tijuana for a while. And at the border was a US government wanted poster that said 'Five Million Dollar Reward for the head of the Arellano Felix crime cartel.' But in Tijuana this guy just rides around town under the protection of the police and army of Mexico. So I began wondering what would happen if an assassin- somebody real good- figured out a way to go down and get him. But this is more than a crime drama. It's really about this broken guy, Ray Liotta, who goes down there only to have his entire perception, focus, and goal changed by a chance meeting with this woman. So, in the tradition of *Man on Fire* and *Eastern Promises*, it's a true character exploration wrapped in an action film. The twists and turns are all about character, while their consequences are played out in the action."



Director James Cotten puts it another way,

"This is two movies on a collision course. The hitman dealing with his inner demons is the independent film—very character-involved. The bigger tableau is the drug cartel with its infighting and the bigger political story of how illegal drugs enter the country, sometimes with our government's help—that's the studio film."

Cotten's shooting style in this picture is to let the tone of each scene inform its camera moves. "This scene is about chaos, so I decided let's shoot it chaotic." In take after take, steady cam operators zig this way and zag that to capture the action like gunmen variously taking cover and

maneuvering for better position.

When the production coordinator handed us earplugs as we first arrived on set my editor asked what these were for. She soon learned that guns are far louder in person than they sound in a movie. Still, that's not the most jarring part. Each take lasts about 20 seconds. Twenty seconds of rapid gunfire stretches to an eternity. On the first take my editor instinctively ducked for cover. Smart girl. Indeed, from our vantage point, we were standing in the line of fire of hundreds of muzzle flashes leaping from 12 guns at the same time. It's an awesome display. Any reasonable person would be scared.

But there's an exhilaration factor there too. And the actors are feeling it. Weapons jumping with each trigger-pull, the world in front of them disappearing in brief bright explosions, the stench of gunpowder, spent shell casings bouncing off them from the recoiling breaches of five other guys' guns—all these were assisting the rage of their character. Even off to the side we could feel sound waves bouncing off our skin. Such a thing makes you strain to either run or shoot back.

By now the downtown L.A. parking lot is littered with brass. Having started the day with almost 3,000 rounds, armorer Bill Davis smirks that they might just run out of ammo. He and his assistants' fingertips are black with gunpowder from continuous reloading.

Shooting breaks for the set-up of an exploding windshield shot. Hulking actors who were moments ago snarling death are now laughing with one another. As the actors file off the set, their capo-suit costumes are soaked in squib-exploded Hollywood blood. All except Esai Morales.

Playing the strong right arm to Andy Garcia's kingpin, it seems it's not yet Morales' turn to pay the ultimate price. I'm expecting Esai to be standoffish as I meet him. Maybe it's the goatee and the shaved head. After all, his character is supposed to look fearsome. But instead he greets me with a firm handshake and affable smile.

I ask him what it was like to be a part of all that chaos. He laughs that it feels just like a kid playing cops n' robbers with your friends, "The only part that bothers me is the occasional fleck of gunpowder in the eye." He invites me to follow him onto a shuttle bus. I'm not sure where we're going, but I'm not asking any questions as his actor-gunsels pile in around us. Okay, now I'm a little nervous. As I stick my tape recorder in Esai's face, asking nosy questions like "Do you enjoy playing a villain?" these guys grin at me like I'm a steak medium rare—like I'd better be respectful of their leading man or I might just not make it back to set.

But Esai goes with the flow, "It's a given that being a bad guy you can have more fun because you can get away with things—until the end of the film, of course." When we chuckle together at that last part, the company laughs along with us. I now realize theirs isn't protectiveness but camaraderie with a genuine guy. Referring to his heroic part in CBS's *Jericho* series, Esai continues, "I've worked at playing against the bad-guy type for years. And I have political reasons for resenting having to play the bad guy a lot. But this script presented such a deliciously evil character. I see him as an underworld visionary who uses religion in a very interesting way. To him, God is the ultimate kingpin. Ultimately we all want to return to our maker. He's just taken a very nasty route."



The bus stops. We pile out in front of an abandoned warehouse where a makeshift cafeteria has been erected for the cast and crew. But the conversation is getting good so we walk past as he tells me, "James Cotten is so open, so polite and open to letting creative energy grow on set. It's weird with me. I've been told 'I heard you were difficult.' And I'm like 'Where?' The director's got to put it all together. It's his vision and we've got to serve. But this is a director who listens too. In this last scene my men were supposed to be protecting me from the fight. But I wondered if my character might come out firing toward the end, since his guys aren't finishing the job. And James liked the idea, and it felt great."

As we walk beneath an unusually cloud dappled L.A. sky, it becomes clear that Esai is a man who has learned to tame his demons to serve his craft. "Part of my study is living my life. The goal of a good artist is to keep in touch with his humanity, to be well rounded, to be balanced. I think the best actors are renaissance artists. We all found out Andy Garcia is this amazing pianist when he sat down at a piano on set. His playing was so moving it became this impromptu part of the scene. And that great character moment wouldn't have been possible without Andy having developed this whole other side of himself. In my own work I'm always seeking such balance. Only then can I know when I'm serving the story versus indulging my ego."

In the chow line, I meet Danny Trejo. I mean he's standing right in front of me. If you've seen *Grindhouse*, you'll remember Danny as the ultra-grizzled feature character in *Machete*, one of the trailer spoofs sandwiched between the two films. I bear homage to *Machete* and ask him what he's doing next. He turns to me, still sporting that signature handlebar mustache, and out comes that infamous gravelly voice, "Robert Rodriguez wants to shoot *Machete* for real, and we're doing it in February." Wow. We start talking.

Seems Danny came into acting through one of those strange quirks of fate. He was drug counseling a young production assistant on *Runaway Train* in 1985 and visited the set one day. Coincidentally, the movie's screenwriter, Eddie Bunker, had served hard time with Danny at San Quentin. So Bunker offered Trejo a job teaching Eric Roberts how to box in the film's key fight scenes. "The director saw me and the next thing you know I'm in the movie playing Roberts' nemesis in the ring."

A child addict and ex-con, Trejo's story is a real-life portrait of redemption. The violent youth who spent 11 years in and out of San Quentin is today a man grateful to be alive, grateful to be creating, and humble in the moment. He doesn't tell me this. He doesn't have to. It exudes from him, which is so poignantly opposite the visage he portrays on screen.

So after a 150 films Danny remains a kid in a candy store. When asked about acting opposite producer Geoffrey Ross, who plays the federal agent blasting away at Danny's character all morning, Trejo beams, "He's producing this film because he loves doing it. Of course he wants to make money, but he's not like 'Come on guys, this is serious. I have money invested.' It's a love that he has for producing and now acting." Indeed, there's a palpable love fest going on among the cast and crew. Where the last day of shooting is typically a high-tension race to the finish, these folks are relaxed and happy in the conviction they've made a good film.

When we catch up with veteran actor Bruce Davison on the way to shooting his final shot, he quickly sums up his character in the film as the CIA head who finances Liotta's mission: "I show up in a Hawaiian shirt and people start dying," he laughs. When the scene is done the crew offers him a standing ovation as the A.D. shouts, "That's a wrap for Mr. Davison!" As we head back to his trailer, Davison shares a story about why he always wanted to work with Andy Garcia which nicely captures the tone on set.



"We're at The Golden Globes, both at the same table, both nominated— he for *Godfather III* and me for *Longtime Companion*. We're sitting there and he says 'How many minutes til we're up? Do you have to take a leak as bad as I do?' I nod, and he says 'Come with me.' We do this S-curve through the kitchen in the back, walk all through these winding corridors, working our way through this maze, and come through a door to a bathroom in the middle of nowhere. I ask him, 'How the hell did you do that!?' And he says, 'I used to be a waiter here.'"