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John Frankenheimer's sinister formula

You wouldn't look twice at David Raybourne if you walked past him in the Piazza Navona. Possessed of neither spectacular looks nor huge talents, he is just another American journalist trying to hack out a living in Rome. That is, until he stumbles upon one of the century's most infamous crimes—the kidnapping and murder of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the radical Communist terrorists known as the Red Brigades.

Such is the setup of *Year of the Gun*, a pulsing little thriller from a director who knows something about the genre, John Frankenheimer. The man behind *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Seven Days in May*, *French Connection II* and *Black Sunday* is a past master at rendering the plights of unexceptional protagonists thrown into exceptional circumstances.

"It's a classic, classic theme," says the 61-year old director in his gruff, clear bark of a voice. "I love the fact that nobody is who he or she seems to be. I like the fact that this man, for all the right reasons, does all the wrong things."

Raybourne, as played by Andrew McCarthy, is a reactive sort of fellow. Struggling to raise money so he can marry his Italian girlfriend (Valeria Golino), he hits upon the idea of writing a novel that thinly fictionalizes the volatile events of his environment. When his manuscript—in which he has used his friends' names as the names of his characters—falls into the hands of the terrorists, they assume one of their cells has been infiltrated and come storming after the writer.

Frankenheimer thinks that the very naiveté of Raybourne, the thing that makes him so nondescript—as played by McCarthy, he could be a graduate student—is necessary to set the thriller in



motion: "He knows what the danger is, but he never understands the fact that it's very, very serious. He figures, Jesus Christ, this is a good way to make a buck. And he just gets everybody in terrible goddamn trouble."

Year of the Gun is compelling in an unassuming way. Frankenheimer's Rome is full of claustrophobic alleys and piazzas that offer no hiding spots from the threat of ambush. Along with cinematographer Blasco Giurato, the director has brought out the city's dull reds and marbled whites, its contrasting ancient and modern faces.

It's not, however, the city of *Roman Holiday*. Indeed, Frankenheimer is all but void of romantic illusions about the setting: "I see Rome as a very sinister place. There's a tremendous feeling of lawlessness there. Nobody really gives a damn about the law. The law's made for somebody else, not for you. The hostility is incredible. The hatred that people have is tremendous. The frustration with the traffic, the frustration with life there, which is so difficult and harsh, all of this

Director John Frankenheimer and his star, Andrew McCarthy, try to get an angle on a problem while shooting the political thriller *Year of the Gun*.

is kept very well shielded from the average tourist. But if you spend any time there and get into the underbelly of it, it's a very rough place." So much for the Thomas Cook package tour of the Eternal City.

Year of the Gun was shot in the very spots in which the events of 1978 took place. Verisimilitude was of great concern: Red Brigades–instigated riots of smoke and flailing batons were shot to match existing TV-news footage; the kidnapping of Moro is shown in precise, accurate detail.

Frankenheimer was more than a little aware that making a film in this way was something of a hot potato: "I was a bit frightened about it, because I didn't know what the repercussions would be," he admits. "A lot of those people are still in jail, but some of them are out. The Italian journalists would say, We hear this is a picture about Moro, and I would say, This has nothing to do with Moro. I did not want to stir up a lot of old flames and hatreds."

Frankenheimer has, for the most part, sped at a pro's pace over the rickety spots in David Ambrose's screenplay of Michael Mewshaw's book. In fact, aside from weak casting (notably the choice of John Pankow to play an Italian intellectual) and a few too-straight-out-of-TV-melodrama moments, *Year of the Gun* is as unpretentious a crackerjack heart-pumper as Hollywood puts out these days. "It involves people," says Frankenheimer, "and that's the name of the game."

—Shawn Levy