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Blunted Samurai: Robert De Niro and Natascha McElhone portray masterless mercenaries in an uninspired successor to Jean-Pierre Melville's masterwork.

Ronin

The spies who came in with the clod. **By Chuck Stephens**

AMONG the many things I learned on my summer vacation in Southeast Asia: actor Alain Delon, once the very definition of the hard-boiled French he-man—*Le Samourai* himself—may have faded from movie screens, but he's well diversified. In Phnom Penh, for example, it's easier to buy Alain Delon cigarettes than a pack of Marlboros, and in Bangkok there are at least two Alain Delon menswear boutiques, both well stocked with high-ticket linen finery.

Jean-Pierre Melville wrote *Le Samourai*—the story of a masterless mercenary whose only confidant is a parakeet—with Delon in mind; Delon had shown the director the lonely contents of his bedroom: a leather sofa and sheathed samurai sword mounted on the wall above. One of the greatest and most influential of crime films, *Le Samourai*—a French ode to faux Japanese stoicism that's steeped in the peripheral details of decades of Hollywood *policiers*—is the missing link between *This Gun for Hire* and *Tokyo Drifter*; the existential floor plan for John Woo's *The Killer*, and perhaps, if we are to extrapolate from a stray quote in the press kit, partially to blame for John Frankenheimer's latest action assertion, *Ronin*: “Jean-Pierre and I learned from each other,” [Frankenheimer] reflects. “He was a great fan of American films in general and I am still deeply in awe of the great European directors’ use of character and silence.”

Frankenheimer should save it for his parakeet. Once capable of astonishments like *French Connection II*

—with garrulous killer cop “Popeye” Doyle tracking hushed drug kingpin “Frog One” through heroin-rich Paris, it's *Le Samourai* in reverse—lately Frankenheimer's been back where he began, directing biopics for television.

[*Ronin* returns him to France, where an international band of mercenaries—once government operatives, “back in the late unpleasantness”—unite under the sign of capital to recover a mysterious suitcase on behalf of IRA terrorists. Among the thugs: Robert De Niro's grumpy old Sam, ex-CIA and apparently unable to shave, and Jean Reno's affable Vincent, a cuddly “coordinator” with a heart of Camembert. Between these two icons of ambiguous late-century manhood—one a stubby signifier of methodics and Scorsesean moral gore, the other a lanky embodiment of Gallic mawkishness and tempered mayhem—a sort of romance blossoms. Wounds open and landscapes are rear-projected. Finally, Reno extracts a bullet from De Niro's mottled belly. “Put the clamp in and stretch the hole,” the Taxi Driver advises The Professional, then swoons when the Teflon-coated tidbit slides out.

Never even approaching the *tricolore* triumphs of Frankenheimer's awful, if ostensibly Melvillian, *Grand Prix*—James Garner! Toshiro Mifune! Yves Montand!—the rest of *Ronin*'s cast is driftwood. Stellan Skarsgård and Sean Bean grimace, Jonathan Pryce snarls through a rough brogue, and an oft-mentioned “cripple in a wheelchair” is never shown—though, given the film's *Playhouse 90*—goes—*Mission: Impossible* level of

mediocrity, a sudden cameo by Jon Voight would scarcely have raised eyebrows. For a moment, even *The Yakuza* is evoked, in order that *Ronin* might make sense of its gratuitous and apparently tacked-on title, but the net effect merely reminds us that there, in the midst of Robert Mitchum and Takakura Ken, even Herb Edelman gave good kabuki.

Ronin gets some mileage from scratching at the zeitgeist as if it were a nasty rash, as when the director attempts to mount “the mother of all car chases”—hammy stuntpeople dodging debris from cheaply assembled breakaway sets—and manages a drive-by evocation of Princess Diana amid some high-speed mayhem in a Parisian underpass. But it's De Niro's well-publicized scrape with French law enforcement during the film's production on which much of the movie's subtext is erected. Detained for nine hours of questioning in connection with an \$8,000-a-night escort service, the actor, enraged, announced that he would never set foot in France again. He appears to have larded his lazy performance with payback as well. One scene requires De Niro and an accomplice to impersonate lovers out for a stroll. “We're just a man and woman, going for a walk,” he mutters, then adds, as if making notes in the margin of a script, “and all that entails....”

Who in the hell is he talking to?

Somebody wake the director. We could use a little more character here. And a lot more silence. ■

'Ronin' opens Fri/25 at Bay Area theaters. See *Movie Clock*, page 123, for show times.