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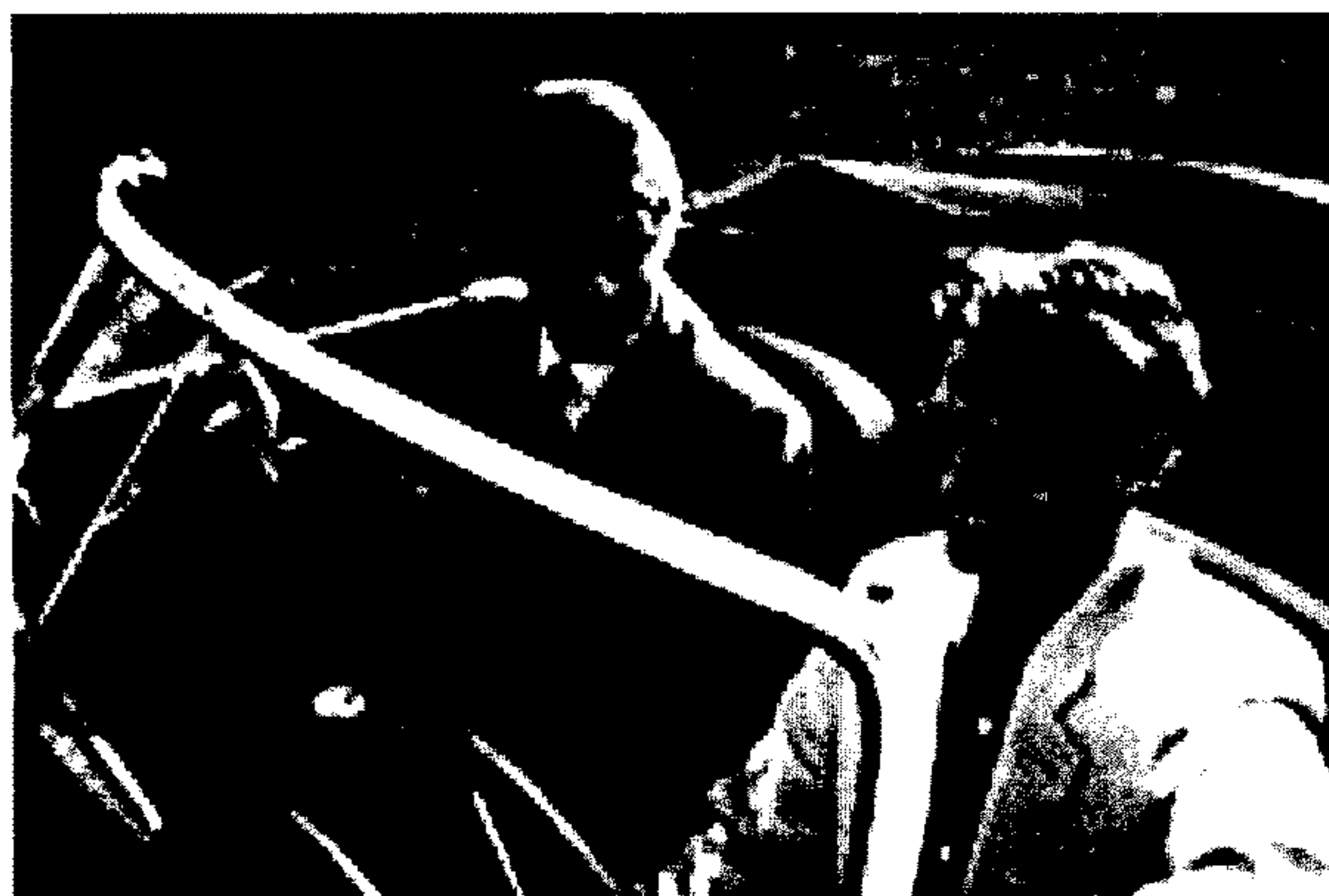
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Interviews

An Interview with Richard Kwietniowski, director of "Love and Death on Long Island"

by Jason Margolis



*John Hurt and Jason Priestly star in
"Love And Death on Long Island."*

Photo Credit: Cinepix Film Properties, Inc.

Before hitting its theatrical release this weekend, first-time director, Richard Kwietniowski's "**Love and Death on Long Island**" has screened to sold out audiences at several North American film festivals. The film has garnered special interest due to its unusual

casting, teaming veteran British thespian John Hurt ("**The Elephant Man**") with pop culture icon Jason Priestly ("**Beverly Hills 90210**").

indieWIRE caught up with Kwietniowski at the Vancouver Film Fest earlier this year and unlike a surprising number of feature directors, he made a point of sitting through his entire screening. As he elaborated, "There is that sense that as the

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lights go down, you become very much a part of something that you're witnessing collectively, which I think is still unique in late Twentieth Century culture."

indieWIRE: Describe "Love and Death on Long Island" for those who haven't seen it.

Kwietniowski: It could be described in many different ways, I suppose. It's about a middle-aged English novelist who really doesn't live in the Twentieth Century at all, and he doesn't come into contact with anything he doesn't fully understand. One day, he goes to the cinema for the first time in twenty years, and something happens that completely and radically changes the rest of his life. He has to go from being a technophobe to dealing with the most extreme opposite cultures to his own. That's the sort of difference represented by John [Hurt] and Jason [Priestly]. It's about these two cultures coming together and being relatively fascinated by each other and doing a sort of dance. What I was interested in was in a sense trapping two completely different people in an elevator and seeing what would happen.

iW: How did the project originate?

Kwietniowski: I came across the novel by Gilbert Adair many years ago by chance and I read it just for pleasure, but immediately loved it and started fantasizing about how it could make a rather wonderful film. I like the two cultures thing. I like the fact that it's about an obsession because a lot of my favorite films are about obsession. I wanted to make a film that in some way quoted a certain type of American culture and sort of oppose it with this very kind of old fashioned English culture. Audiences around the world tend to recognize both those extremes and enjoy it.

iW: You worked with a very interesting cast on this film.

Kwietniowski: It seemed to me really important to try and cast it in a way that reflected the storyline as much as possible, and all roads tended to lead to John Hurt. You can't really write exclusively for one person because they may be busy or not interested, and you give it to your second choice and they say "This is an outrage! This is clearly written for the other guy!" But I knew John would be very convincing immediately as this bookish intellectual. I needed somebody who



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would have the ability to make an audience share things across an hour and a half. And I've always thought that he's fantastically good at humor. So when I was thinking about him, I would take a photograph of him and I would take a photograph of Jason and it would always make me smile looking at the two photographs together. The weird thing about film is it's a bit like building a boat, and then you've got to persuade other people to jump onto your boat, which might sink immediately or become an ocean liner and cross the Atlantic. So once I had those two on board, it became rather magical because I knew there would come a day when I would have to introduce them to each other and just stand back and watch the chemistry.

iW: Gilbert Adair's novel was itself partly a satire of Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice". Did that influence you in any way?

Kwietniowski: It's impossible in 1997 to write a completely original story. There's only so many stories in the world. So that was quite important to the concept of the book. This was, if you like, a sort of rock n' roll "**Death in Venice**", as somebody described it. To me it was less important because I was once removed from that because it was based on the book. And I wanted to make a film that somebody who'd never ever heard of the novel or the film "Death in Venice" would appreciate. Because I loved the project of the book so much, it made me much more determined to get the film made. I think if I woke up one morning and said I want to make this wacky, contemporary remake of "Death in Venice", and then got the initial reaction I got in London - which was that nobody was interested for at least eighteen months - I would have believed them. But because it worked in the book, I became like a terrier, determined that somehow this film would eventually be made.

iW: That's what it takes to get a film made, right?

Kwietniowski: I think you have to believe to an inordinate extent in your project, because if you don't, how can you expect other people to? It's not just a question of finding funding to finance it, it's a question of finding the right financier or funder, somebody who wants you to make the project that you want to make. If that takes a little bit longer than you'd like, you could still keep developing it. You could still do new drafts. You could still think really, really deeply about the casting. This is all very important. So many people seem very promising, then they make their first

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feature films too early. And all the things interesting about their TV work or short films has kind of gone out the window. It may be sort of okay or competent, but it's very conventional and uninteresting. It doesn't really say "Come and see me!" Of course, "Love and Death on Long Island" was always going to have to be a fairly extreme project. I mean, I had to shoot on both sides of the Atlantic. I had to shoot scenes from horrific B movies. I had to deal with a very kind of bizarre subject matter. I couldn't avoid any of those things. So I was able to give myself the time to try to get it right.

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