

Quintessential Quentin!

Written by Kam Williams



With a vibrant imagination and dedication to rich, layered storytelling, Quentin Tarantino has established himself as one of the most celebrated filmmakers of his generation. His World War II epic, “Inglorious Basterds,” was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Screenplay, and Best Achievement in Directing, and landed an Oscar for Christoph Waltz for his memorable portrayal of Colonel Hans Landa. .

Prior to “Inglorious Basterds,” Tarantino thrilled audiences with “Death Proof,” starring Kurt Russell and Zoë Bell. In “Kill Bill Vol. 1” and “Kill Bill Vol. 2,” Uma Thurman, as “The Bride,” enacted a “roaring rampage of revenge” on her former lover and boss, played by David Carradine.

Quentin wrote and directed “Jackie Brown,” a crime caper starring Pam Grier in the title role. Loosely based on Elmore Leonard’s novel “Rum Punch,” the picture netted Robert Forster an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

Tarantino co-wrote, directed and starred in “Pulp Fiction” which won an Academy Award for Best Screenplay. He wrote, directed and starred in “Reservoir Dogs,” which marked the beginning of his career and made an auspicious debut at the Sundance Film Festival.

Here, he talks about his new movie, “Django Unchained”, a Western featuring Jamie Foxx in the title role as a slave-turned-bounty hunter, and co-starring Christoph Waltz, Samuel L. Jackson, Leonardo DiCaprio and Kerry Washington.

Kam Williams: Hi Quentin, thanks for the interview.

Quentin Tarantino: Oh, it’s my pleasure, Kam.

KW: The last time we spoke, the conversation went so well, the interview is going to be published in the new edition of Quentin Tarantino Interviews.

QT: Oh yeah! Edited by Gerald Peary! Volume 2. Cool! <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1578060516/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: Let me start with a question from Larry Greenberg, a reader who also sent in a question for that interview: He says: When I got to ask Mr. Tarantino a question about Inglorious

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Basterds his answer changed my life and inspired me to go into filmmaking. It gave me permission to pursue my dream. If that had not happened, I doubt that I would be sitting here today with a script and an insane deadline. It was a key turning point in my life. This time, I'd like to know how you came up with the characters Django and Dr. Schultz [played by Christoph Waltz] and how did you dream up their relationship?

QT: Wow, Larry! That's great! As for the scriptwriting process, it was kind of funny. I always knew I wanted to do a Western. And trying to think of what that would be, I always figured that if I did a Western, it would have a lot of the aesthetics of Spaghetti Westerns, because I really like them. They're really brutal and operatic with a surreal quality to the violence. So, about eight years ago, I came up with the idea of a black man who was an ex-slave who had become a bounty hunter. And his job would be to track down white outlaws who were hiding out as overseers on Southern plantations. Now, that's not a story; that's just an idea. That was kicking around in the incubator for about eight years, waiting for its time. At the same time, I was writing a film criticism book on Sergio Corbucci, the director who did the original Django. So, I was kind of getting immersed in his world. Towards the end of the Inglourious Basterds press tour I was in Japan. Spaghetti Westerns are really popular there, so I picked up a bunch of soundtracks and spent my day off listening to all these scores. And all of a sudden the opening scene just came to me. It just came to me, and I knew I had to sit down and write it, even though I didn't even have my notepad with me. So, I was just writing it on the hotel stationery. During those previous eight years, I never had a German, dentist bounty hunter in mind for the character. [Chuckles] But during that time, I did get to direct Christoph Waltz who was one of the best actors I'd ever worked with. Nobody does my dialogue better than he and Sam Jackson do. They just sing it! And now I think it's going to be hard for me not to write for him. Anyway, I just started writing that scene, and this German bounty hunter shows up.

KW: What was the most challenging aspect of writing the script? Addressing racial issues? Historical accuracy? Did you feel any pressure to conform to political-correctness, or did you feel free to take poetic license, given the glowing reception of audiences to Hitler's dying in a movie theater in Inglourious Basterds?

QT: I felt no obligation to bow to any 21st Century political correctness. What I did feel an obligation to do was to take the 21st Century viewers and physically transport them back to the ante bellum South in 1858, in Mississippi, and have them look at America for what it was back then. And I wanted it to be shocking.

KW: Have you seen the film yet with a black audience?

QT: Yes I have!

KW: And what was their reaction? I know how an all-black audience feels comfortable enough to talk back to the screen and let you know exactly how they feel about what's happening.

QT: [Laughs] Let's put it like this: We screened it for heavily-black audiences quite a few times, where the audience was between 40 and 60 percent black. That's pretty black. We also screened it for a 100 percent black audience, and you would've thought it was 1973 and they

Quintessential Quentin!

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were watching the end of *Coffy* [A blaxploitation era flick starring Pam Grier]. It's funny because I was sitting next to [executive producer] Harvey Weinstein and he turns to me and says, "I guess we know who we made this movie for." [LOL] But the film really has a lot of ups and downs, and taps into a lot of different emotions. To me, the trick was balancing all those emotions, so that I could get you where I wanted you to be by the very end. I wanted the audience cheering in triumph at the end. So, as rough as some of the things I show in the movie are, they couldn't be so rough that you're too traumatized to enjoy the movie any longer.

KW: Gil Cretney doesn't have a question, but he just wants to say thanks for not filming the movie in 3-D.

QT: [LOL] You're welcome, Gil!

KW: Irene Smalls: Why this film? Why now, in the Obama era?

QT: [Chuckles] I would've written this story if Obama were president or if he never existed. For one, I think it's time to tell a story that deals with this subject America has avoided for so long. Most countries have been forced to deal with the atrocities of their past that still affect them to this day. But America has been pretty slippery in the way that it has avoided looking slavery in the eye. I believe that's a problem. We should be talking about it to get past it and to get over it. Not only that, frankly, this is an American story that needs to be told, when you think of slavery existing in this country for 245 years. In slave narratives there were all types of tales and drama and heroism and pain and love that happened during that time. That's rich material for drama! Everyone complains that there are no new stories left to tell. Not true, there are a whole bunch of them, and they're all American with a capital A.

KW: Why do you think you're the first director to confront slavery in such a frank fashion?

QT: I hate to sound full of myself but maybe I just have the shoulders.

KW: Nick Antoine says: Westerns seem to have fallen out of favor in recent years. Even Rian Johnson's *Looper*, which was sort of a subtle homage to the genre, didn't enjoy as much success as I think it deserved. Why do you think Westerns are so unpopular? I think Westerns are the best!

QT: If you ask me, I'd say Westerns have been doing really well. *True Grit* did great, and *3:10 to Yuma* did pretty well, too. I actually think there's something else going on. There was that last blast of Westerns that came out in the Seventies, those Vietnam/Watergate Westerns where everything was about demystification. And I like that about those movies. And there's another aspect about the Seventies. *Blazing Saddles*, as wonderful as it was, sort of hurt the Western. It made such fun of them, that you almost couldn't take them seriously from that point on. That's why only Westerns that had the stink of Watergate or Vietnam could be taken seriously. There were so few Westerns made since then, from the Eighties on, that the few directors who did were so pleased with themselves and so happy to have the opportunity that they got lost in visuals, they got lost in the vistas and the pretty scenery. Suddenly, Westerns, which were our action films and what the working man went to see to blow off steam and have a good time,

Quintessential Quentin!

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became boring to most people growing up from the Eighties on, because they're kind of pastoral.

KW: Interesting. I never thought of them that way. Film student Jamaal Green asks: What are your three favorite Shaw Brothers films?

QT: Great question, Jamaal! My three favorite Shaw brothers films would be The Avenging Eagle directed by Chung Sun, King Boxer, AKA Five Fingers of Death, and the last would have to be one by Chang Cheh. So, I'm going to go with Five Element Ninja, AKA Chinese Super Ninjas.

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles: What would you say were the most essential components in a script you consider working on?

QT: That's kind of a tough question. Well, maybe not. The dialogue. But the dialogue and the characters would be wrapped up in each other, because if I'm doing my job right, then I'm not writing the dialogue; the characters are saying the dialogue, and I'm just jotting it down. So, it's all about me getting into the heads of the characters. I prop them up a little bit, and then they take over from there.

KW: Since you're also the director, do you ever have trouble adapting your vision to the screen?

QT: Sometimes. But usually the process is that it gets better, because when I'm writing in my bedroom, in a bar, at my kitchen table or wherever, I'm conjuring it all up on the page. That's all well and good, but it is going to be a limited perspective at that point and time. Occasionally, what I write might read really well initially, but then you change your mind while hunting for locations when you discover settings which offer even better opportunities for drama or dramatic staging.

KW: Keith Kremer asks: How do you feel about the end of the year award season? Is it too much? Are you honored when recognized or do you not even care?

QT: [Laughs] For some reason, everyone thinks I'm always too cool for school when it comes to competing for trophies. But I worked extremely hard on this movie all year long, so it's really nice to get recognized and be considered one of the best in the end. And it's nice to get invited to the parties and to be able to hobnob and celebrate a job well done with your colleagues. However, I have it all in perspective. If the film is nominated for awards, and even if it wins them, it doesn't make the movie any better, just as if it's ignored that doesn't make the movie any worse. A lot of the movies I love didn't get nominated the years they came out. The Wild Bunch didn't win best picture in 1969, Oliver did. [Laughs]

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

QT: So far, I see a happy guy doing what I'm supposed to be doing. So far, so good.

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KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

QT: Frankly, my earliest childhood memories are of watching Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein and Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed. I remember not liking Frankenstein then and going, "Who is this bald guy?" But I love it now.

KW: Well, thanks again for the honor, Quentin, and best of luck with the film.

QT: I always look forward to talking to you, Kam. Good talking to you.

To see a trailer for Django Unchained, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pKZbJHa17c>