

An interview with Michael Fitzgerald, producer of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

By David Walsh
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Two weeks ago, we posted a review of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the film directed by Ciro Guerra, from a screenplay by South African-born author J.M. Coetzee and based on the latter's novel of the same title, published in 1980. The film, with important lead performances by Mark Rylance, Johnny Depp and Robert Pattinson, takes place on the borders of a 19th century "Empire."

The central figure is a Magistrate, a middling, lifetime civil servant, who becomes a witness, against his will, to increasingly savage repression by security police and government forces against the local, nomad population. Ultimately, he speaks out and acts in opposition to the violence, with severe consequences for himself.

In our review, we suggested that *Waiting for the Barbarians* was "a very strong film, painful at times to watch, and a thoughtful, devastating work of art, rare in our day." We added that there was no way "to seriously interpret this film as anything but a searing indictment of imperialism, and American imperialism in particular. Indeed, it is hard to think of a more uncompromising indictment in recent decades."

I was recently able to speak with Michael Fitzgerald, one of the producers of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. As Fitzgerald explains in the conversation below, he has a history in movies extending back to the late 1970s. He first produced two films with John Huston, *Wise Blood* (1979) and *Under the Volcano* (1984), based on the 1947 novel by Malcolm Lowry, the latter of which was nominated for two Academy Awards.

Fitzgerald subsequently produced *The Penitent* (Cliff Osmond, 1988), starring Raul Julia, *Mister Johnson* (1990) with Academy Award-winning director Bruce Beresford, and *Blue Danube Waltz* (1992) with well-known Hungarian filmmaker Miklós Jancsó.

A partnership with actor/director Sean Penn resulted in their production of *The Pledge* (2001), with Jack Nicholson. In 2005 he completed both *Colour Me Kubrick* (Brian Cook), starring John Malkovich, about a conman who impersonates director Stanley Kubrick, and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, directed by and starring Tommy Lee Jones. At the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* received the Acting Award for Jones and the Screenplay Award for Guillermo Arriaga. Fitzgerald also produced *In the Electric Mist* (Bertrand Tavernier, 2009).

We spoke on the phone.

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Michael Fitzgerald: First of all, I wanted to thank you for your piece, because it was really well thought through and delicately written, and a lovely look at the whole thing. I was very grateful to see it, and so there you are.

David Walsh: Thank you. Likewise, I'm deeply appreciative of the film and your efforts.

Could you tell me something, if it's not too daunting, about your life and background in film?

MF: Summarizing very quickly, I grew up in Italy. My father [Robert Fitzgerald] was a poet—and translator—and he brought his family to Italy in

the 1950s. All the children were sent to boarding schools to learn English, and I was sent off to a Benedictine Abbey in the west of Ireland called Glenstal Abbey. I went to University College Dublin for a year and then transferred to Harvard.

By then my father was the Boylston Professor at Harvard and the family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s. When I graduated in 1973, I went back to Italy to teach. I fell into screenplay writing and decided, along with my brother (who many years later wrote the screenplay for *The Passion of The Christ*), to strike out for Hollywood in 1975.

That was a frustrating experience as you would imagine.

So I decided that instead of sitting by the telephone waiting for someone to react to what we were writing—we didn't know anyone when we went out there—I would try and pick something that I thought was extraordinary and go all the way through with it, just produce it, make it or get it made.

I picked the first novel of Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* [1952]. On the premise that I didn't know anything and therefore I should go and work with the person who knew everything, I managed to get in touch with John Huston who by then had 40 movies behind him, and had been something of a legendary figure in Ireland when I was growing up.

I somehow managed to find his number in Mexico, called him and he answered. I sent him the screenplay and he thought it was fabulous and asked me to come down to see him. I spent a week as his guest in Puerto Vallarta. Huston said he would stand behind me no matter what. And he did. It took me a couple of years to raise the money, frustrating years, but in the end I got the necessary amount to make the film, and he was there as he said he would be. Off we went. That started it all.

DW: How old were you then?

MF: When I first got to John Huston? 25.

DW: Was that filmmaking experience an interesting and valuable one?

MF: It was extraordinary. He was an extraordinary man. I decided then that I would never make a film with anyone else. If he had lived, I never would have. But he died [in 1987]. In the meantime, we had gone on to make *Under the Volcano* [1984], a few years later. We were going to make a film called *Mister Johnson*, which I ultimately made with Bruce Beresford [1990]. It was something that John had wanted to do all his life, but for most of his lifetime making a film with a Nigerian lead would just have been impossible.

DW: How did you develop the association with Tommy Lee Jones?

MF: Oddly enough, Tommy Lee graduated from Harvard in 1969, the year I started there. He had done his senior thesis on Flannery O'Connor. I knew that when I went to cast *Wise Blood*, and he was one of the people I called upon to play the leading character. But then John and I preferred to go in another direction. I've known him since that time. We kept up with each other, and I had and have a great admiration for him as an actor and now as a director. I have produced two film which he starred in and directed, *The Three Burials Of Melquiades Estrada* and *The Homesman* [2014].

DW: You have a kind of family connection to Flannery O'Connor.

MF: Yes, she lived with us in Connecticut while she was writing *Wise Blood*, oddly enough. She only went home when she had her first attack of lupus. She would have been about 21 years old at the time, and my parents eventually became her literary executors.

DW: Can you speak about your association with John Coetzee?

MF: It goes back a long time. Over the decades we became friends. I think he fully understands my devotion to his work, let's put it that way. I adore his work, there's no other way of putting it. It does something to me that very little, if anything else does.

I identify profoundly with the human beings he has pulled out of thin air. He wrote a book called *Life & Times of Michael K*. That I would identify with Michael K, who is essentially a disturbed and even retarded black man wandering around Cape Town, South Africa, that I would identify with such a figure strikes me as rather bizarre, but it is, nevertheless, true.

Ever since I read *Waiting for the Barbarians* I have wanted to make it into a movie. It's been a north star in my life for almost 30 years.

DW: Why that particular work?

MF: At the heart of the story is an ordinary man. A Magistrate. I identify with him. He wants to steer away from trouble, he can see it coming, but doesn't want any part of it. In the story, he rebels against the very empire he represents at great cost to himself. And I would wish for myself, as I would wish for most of us, that we too might have the courage to stand up, even at the cost of our lives, and say "I won't do this anymore."

Someone said an interesting thing to me. He suggested that when the hammer comes up, and the Magistrate makes his quixotic move, that even the moment before he didn't know he was going to do that. All the events in the film that precede this are a preparation for that act of rebellion, but the extraordinary thing is that even he doesn't know what he's about to do.

Until that moment he rants and raves, he wants to clean everything up, he wants to get away from it all, all the things I imagine I would have wanted to do in his circumstances.

DW: But it is unusual, and admirable, that the book portrays someone who does make that kind of decision. The vast majority of works today tend to do the opposite.

MF: It's the only thing that makes it interesting.

DW: In 1980, what was Coetzee responding to, directly or indirectly? What was the driving force behind *Waiting for the Barbarians*?

MF: I think his is a wide-ranging mind and informed by many things. Neither the book nor the film, for example, have anything do with apartheid in South Africa in that immediate sense.

However, the remarks that are made by the young soldier to the Magistrate about what happened to the old man who "attacks" his interrogators and then is killed are the verbatim comments from the police report on the death of the activist Steve Biko in 1977. The police reported that Biko hit his head against the wall while he attacked them, that sort of nonsense. So the book and film are informed by that experience, by the behavior of "empire," by all the things that governments have been doing since the beginning of time.

DW: You speak about a 30-year effort to make the film. Could you give some highlights?

MF: Well, it ranged from being very close to making it with Ben Kingsley and Tommy Lee Jones in 1993, to going with Werner Herzog to the Tian Shan mountains in 2000 above the Taklamakan Desert in western China, where we would have hoped to make the film with Werner directing it, to spending a month with John Box, the production designer of David Lean, from whom I've learned a great deal, in Morocco looking for locations, many of which we would end up using 25 years later.

DW: *Waiting for the Barbarians* had a powerful impact and significance

in 1980 or so, when it was written or when it appeared. Does it have a greater impact and significance, or a different one, in 2020, some 40 years later?

MF: I think it's just gotten closer, basically. Of course, it had a resonance certainly in the more enlightened places in the West, a kind of an intellectual resonance perhaps. But now it seems to be in our backyard, or front yard, or basement, first floor, second floor...and attic. It seems to speak to our best and worst angels very closely. We refer to the "Other" as "barbarian," and we fear what we do not know, and we use that fear to keep control over others. There is little or no nuance to it, it is raw loathing and power-mongering, empire.

Many of us live like the Magistrate in a wary relationship to it that power. We have been living the sunny side to it, but the dark clouds are there, they're frightening and they're very close to us.

I spent a year at University College Dublin studying the Second World War and studying the history of Germany in the 1930s—that would certainly give one pause today.

DW: Coetzee made all the changes from the novel to the screenplay? They were all his ideas?

MF: My first thought when I met John was that I would never do this unless it was his writing of it. That's what I was interested in. He wrote the screenplay in 1993. We only tweaked it very recently, but very little.

DW: That's interesting. He was writing things in 1993 that spoke very strongly to what would play out over the next 25 years.

MF: The world has been too much with us for a very long time.

DW: I grant you, but that the last 25 years have witnessed a particular eruption of American imperialist violence.

MF: That's right. But I think part of the point of the book is that it's always there underneath, something to be wary of.

DW: Do you have any sense of how Coetzee views the present world situation?

MF: He's an 80-year-old man, in very good condition, but he's slightly over 80. ... I think he lives in his own world, I don't think he pays too much attention to the contemporary world. Various things appall him, of course.

DW: How did the film attract the cast that it did?

MF: The only answer I've really got for you, is that it attracted them because it's good.

DW: Fair enough, but not all good scripts attract good actors.

MF: Sometimes that is a failure of imagination on the part of the producer. That's one of the things John Huston taught me. If you think you've got it, go for the biggest stars. Why not? As often as not, people love to be offered something they can sink their teeth into. In fact, it's also really the best way to get actors for very little money, offer them something substantial.

As I say, this is something I've done for years, and much to the joy of many actors who got to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do.

Mark Rylance is an incredible actor. I saw him in [Steven Spielberg's] *Bridge of Spies*, and I thought, this is the guy. He was mesmerizing, you couldn't take your eyes off him. I thought, I cannot fail to make this film while this guy is around. I have to do it with him.

I've been thinking of Johnny Depp in the part of Col. Joll for, it seems, 20 years. I've known him for 25 years. He is one of the finest actors around. There is something in the character of Joll as written in the novel that gives you the sense that the man is doing what he has to do, but he would much rather be at the opera, in a pair of soft slippers, in a dainty costume and not doing all this terrible stuff. I thought that Johnny had that sort of delicacy that would make the character even more horrifying. He will take on any challenge as an actor, if you offer it to him. He doesn't always have it offered to him.

For both Rylance and Depp, it was a sensational experience. Mark Rylance learned a great deal from Johnny Depp, and vice versa. That is

the way it ought to be.

DW: What about the generally cool or even unfriendly critical reception?

MF: I was expecting it, you know. If you look at everything else that's being done—everything is so distracted and distracting, there's a cut every two seconds, you're being constantly dazzled. That seems to be the objective. We made a very deliberate choice to forgo that, not because we didn't know how to do it, but because we didn't think it was appropriate.

We wanted to follow this man, to follow his awakening, to follow him right up until the moment he makes an irreparable choice. We needed to get him there, we couldn't do it with razzle-dazzle. We needed him to explore, we needed him to put his fingers where the torture had taken place, to question what was going on. That can't be done in two-second scenes.

DW: I understand, but I don't think it was only the stylistic issues that made the critics unhappy. It was also the content, the film's anger, its outrage.

MF: Of course, this is very uncomfortable. That's why I did it. Because the source material made me uncomfortable.

I'm pleased that you thought highly of the film, and we shall see what happens.

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