

Ted Demme BLOWS UP

In 1988, Ted Demme was a production assistant at MTV when he got the call from the higher-ups: Create new programming. The groundbreaking series *Yo! MTV Raps* was the result of that decree. Five years later, he busted out of television to direct his first feature film, *Who's the Man?* It was soon followed by *The Ref*, *Beautiful Girls* and *Life*. This month he helms *Blow*, the true story of one George Jung (played by Johnny Depp), a major-league drug smuggler. *The Movies* rapped with Demme; here's what he had to say. By Alejandro Ferreyra

Q: What life experiences have helped your directing?

A: It's funny. The way I relate to the cast and crew can be traced back to my sports days. During high school, I was captain of the football and baseball teams, and through that became a pretty good motivator and leader. If you look at what directing is about, putting aside the creative part, it's basically the same. I got a lot of that from athletics...and from my Dad.

Q: Did your uncle [Jonathan Demme, the Oscar-winning director of *Silence of the Lambs*] give you any advice when you were starting out?

A: He said two things to me during my production assistant days that I'll

never forget: Don't ever be late for work, and don't be afraid to ask a dumb question.

Q: Why did you decide to have George narrate the film?

A: George's story is so big, and it's not only about him, but kind of a history of the cocaine boom in the '70s and '80s. Nick [Cassavetes, who along with David McKenna wrote the screenplay] and I decided we needed voice-over. To be honest, we wanted to lean on it as a crutch a little bit. It was also a great way to get inside this guy's head and see what he was thinking. When George, at the end of the movie, is gardening and dreaming of his daughter, he has just replayed the whole film in his head.

Q: Who did you speak with to get insight into Jung's life?

A: One of the deputy directors from the FBI worked as my main adviser. Some of the feds who followed George in the late '60s helped a lot, too. They provided all the factual information, both historical and present-day. George's wife, Mirtha, and daughter Kristina, also advised me.

Q: Yet Mirtha didn't end up being shown in the most appealing light.

A: Mirtha allowed us into her heart in order to help others. She wanted to show how drugs affected her family.

Q: How involved was the real Jung?

A: Lots. I brought Johnny up to the prison a number of times to visit him. He also went alone at least once a week throughout production. You've probably never heard how the real guy acts or speaks, but it's Johnny. He nailed it.

Q: Was Depp your first choice?

A: Yup, 100 percent. I knew that I needed an amazing chameleon, and I've loved everything he's done. And once Depp was in, I got everyone else I wanted. When someone asked, "Who else is in the movie?" I just had to tell them Johnny Depp and they'd say, "Oh, I'm in!"

Q: How did you get Penélope Cruz to play the fiery Mirtha?

A: My pitch to her was that I didn't want her to do anything that she'd done before. I told her, "I want you to be loud, abrasive and obnoxious, and then be really broke down and not look too attractive." At the end of the movie, she has a wig on and horrible sweatsuits. Actually, I think that's what attracted her to the part.

Q: Did you intentionally put together an international cast? [German Franke Potente, star of *Run Lola Run*,

plays Jung's early love interest; Australian Rachel Griffiths plays his mother; Jordi Molla, who plays Jung's partner, and Cruz are Spanish.]

A: My films tend to have pretty big casts. I conducted an experiment: If I had a big enough name in Johnny, I wanted to see if the supporting parts could be played by stars from around the world so they would help the picture do well financially in those countries. It alleviated the pressure of casting "big stars" for those parts, and the studio let me do it.

Q: How did Ray Liotta come aboard?

A: I'm lucky enough to have known Ray for a while. One day we met for a drink and I said that I wanted him to play Johnny Depp's dad. And he goes [in a gravelly, Liotta-esque voice]: "What are you talkin' about? I'm only a few years older than him!" Eventually, when he got to know the story, he got into it.

Q: How did that eight-year age difference play out on the set?

A: They hit it off great, and I'm really proud of Ray's performance. It's what every one of my male friends notices about the movie, the dynamic of the

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Ted Demme On...

Who's the Man? (1993) with Dr. Dre, at right, and Ed Lover: "Learning curve."



The Ref (1994) with Kevin Spacey and Judy Davis: "Okay, we're not kidding. We've got real actors now."



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father-son relationship. Every guy has a dad story, whether it's a good one or a bad one. Ray and Johnny were just so amazingly real and not corny... those guys are class-A actors. I just said, "Action!" and sat back.

Q: Liotta seems like a pretty intense actor. Did you see any of that?

A: One of the coolest things about Ray is that he did five hair and make-up tests, and each one took about four or five hours. That's a lot of work for a supporting part. Every time he would come out and look in my eyes and ask, "You don't love it, do ya?" I'd be like, [sigh], "No, not yet." And he'd go, "F--- it, let's take it off and do it again."

Q: How many takes did you do of that scene in which George passes out while watching the birth of his child?

A: Just four, and two on the wide shot. Johnny was wearing knee pads, but it probably still hurt a little. He'd jump up, though, and say, "Let's do it again! The black and blues will go away."

Q: Do you want this movie to get a message across about drug use or is it pure entertainment?

A: There's no denying the backdrop

of the story—I'm even putting it in the title. But hopefully audiences will be overcome by the dramatic consequences of what happens to this man. I never wanted the movie to be preachy.

Q: You've directed some pretty big-name actors: Depp, Eddie Murphy and Kevin Spacey. Anyone you're aching to work with?

A: Jack [Nicholson]! So badly, I can't even breathe. Unfortunately, I'm too scared to talk to him. It's like asking out the coolest chick in the world and knowing she's probably going to laugh in your face.

Q: You have a cameo as Jung's lawyer at the end of the movie...

A: That's me, Archie Zigmund! I've had more than one role that hasn't been credited [laughs], so you'll have to keep your eyes open. The other movies I've acted in are top secret!

Q: Any future acting plans?

A: I think I'm the most talented actor of my generation who hasn't been used! I urge all filmmakers to hire me immediately! I'm an untapped talent, a fresh face, very easy to work with, and I'm a lot of fun on the set. ★

Beautiful Girls (1996) with Timothy Hutton and Natalie Portman:
"How did I get this lucky?"



Monument Ave. (1998) with Denis Leary: "You better not blow this."

His friend Denis:

"An enormous pain in the ass...oh wait, can you put huge fag?"

