

By Cynthia Amsden



Saul Rubinek

DIRECTS *JERRY & TOM*

Saul Rubinek has a small joke. If you want to make God laugh, say four small words: I have a plan. Then he recommends you pause and wait for everything to spiral out of control. Rubinek avoids that eventuality by disclaiming anything other than luck and hard work as being the author of a career that has brought him to his directorial debut with the film, *Jerry & Tom*. But luck, as it's said, is talent.

As one of the premier Canadian actors of his generation, Saul Rubinek has always been an anomaly. Now he is a directing anomaly. Three decades ago, he didn't follow the Stratford route, the expatriate path, or the comedy itinerary of *Second City* or *Yuk Yuk's* to find his way to the big screen. He did appear in *Star Trek's Next Generation* as Kivas Fajo which granted him fringe cult status. He hasn't fed himself into the star vehicle machine or the guest spot supporting-role-lead-role sitcom circuit. He didn't flare up. He didn't fizzle out. As a director, he didn't go the academic route except, as he explains, to study "at the University of 20-years experience" on the set, which included learning from famed Quebec director Claude Jutra (he directed Saul in the underrated *By Design*), who became a close friend. He has flown in under everyone's radar—slow, self-possessed, persistent and successful.

Jerry & Tom is about two low-rent hit men—Tom, a veteran, and Jerry, his apprentice. During the day, they work at a used-car lot which sells maybe three



Above: Joe Mantegna with Sam Rockwell

photos courtesy of Lions Gate Films

Jerry

cars a year, enough to warrant late-night television commercials of the lowest order. Their evenings are sporadically occupied with Tom initiating Jerry in the craft of ending someone's life. "The first time is happenstance, you just happen to be there; the second time is coincidence, it's your choice. Third time, you're on the job," Tom explains. But the tone is beyond the mere instructional. When Jerry begins to develop excessive curiosity, Tom cautions him: "Curiosity strangled the cat." Jerry: "I thought the expression was 'curiosity killed the cat.'" Tom: "God is in the details, Jerry."

Starring Joe Mantegna as Tom and Sam Rockwell as Jerry, with Maury Chaykin (Billy, the florid lot owner) and Charles Durning (Vic, the old pro whose resumé is rumoured to include two words, "grassy knoll"), *Jerry & Tom* is a sooty black comedy spiked with moments of paternal tenderness. The cameos from Ted Danson, William H. Macy and Peter Riegert punctuate the film with restrained mirth. These actors also reflect much of Rubinek's own *curriculum vitae*, having worked along side him in the past.

The leitmotif of happenstance rings through Rubinek's life. He was born in 1948 in a German refugee camp to parents who were, by the time they were 19-years-old, on the run from Axis forces. He grew up in Ottawa and, in his early 20s, began to pursue acting in the States. Instead of switching teams completely, he acquired dual citizenship, keenly aware at the time that a cross-border career choice was uncommon. His wider focus did afford him the opportunity to not only keep his options open, but also accumulate a video cassette (he currently has close to 50 works to his name) with 10 leading roles on it.

Prudence Rubinek will admit to, but the idea of controlling and predetermining his career makes him laugh. "The same year I did *Unforgiven*, I did *Bonfire of the Vanities*. I liked *Unforgiven*, but thought it would be seen by five people—in France. As for *Bonfire*, I never thought the American people would feel the novel had been raped and pillaged. They were unmerciful. So, nobody knows; You work very hard and you go with your choices."

In 1993, casting director and theatre director Risa Bramon-Garcia approached Rubinek in Los Angeles about directing a play for a marathon festival of 15 one-act plays held over a three-day period. The idea had the appeal of relief as he had just come off of two films back-to-back and

he had the theatrical background to substantiate the offer. The play had a cast of three, Tom, Jerry and another actor (Dan Castellana, the voice of Homer Simpson) who played all the victims "as a kind of Every Victim" Rubinek recalled while sitting at the Ellipsis café in downtown Toronto. They were met with enormous success and Rick Cleveland, the playwright, formed a strong relationship with Rubinek. After the festival, Showtime bought the rights to all the plays, but never produced them. Once the rights had lapsed, it left this ripe peach of a play available for the plucking.

Prior to this, Rubinek's efforts to produce a film had been so unsuccessful that he wanted some kind of immunity from spontaneous combustion before beginning a new venture. In the late 1980s, he had spent three years putting together what would have been the first slacker movie, starring the who's who of Canadian film, including Kate Lynch, Megan Follows, Nat Craven and Eric Peterson, based on the award-winning play, *White Boys*. As Rubinek describes it, someone at Telefilm Canada didn't like the script and the entire project was closed down overnight. While not an unusual experience in the Canadian industry, it was one he was not looking forward to repeating.

When the Showtime rights stale-dated, Cleveland, Rubinek and story editor Elinor Reid (Rubinek's wife) formed a partnership. Reid devised a way to adapt the play for the screen, and Cleveland put it into effect by the end of 1993. In 1994, the idea was to do a low-budget film using the original cast. But they soon discovered being frugal in Hollywood is a weak magnet and to be taken seriously. Serious money has to be at stake. A year later, Rubinek passed the script to a friend, Joe Mantegna (*Up Close and Personal*, *Albino Alligator*), who was intrigued with the role of Tom. Together they discussed the idea of expanding the part of the victim into separate parts, mostly to avoid the film becoming a star vehicle. There were 100 investors who came to a reading of *Jerry & Tom* with Joe Mantegna, Charles Durning and William H. Macy and out of that, the money (\$3 million U.S.) came from Mike Pastornek at Lions Gate Entertainment. Remarkably, the project was greenlit without a "Jerry" in place. With the financing secured, Rubinek decided to go for the best actor to fill the last role. Sam Rockwell, who had been in *A Box of Moonlight*, was cast after one meeting, an occurrence that came as a surprise even to him.



Above: Ted Danson
Below: William H. Macy

& Tom

Rubinek worked with Cleveland to raise the study of the hit man genre to a more profound level. "It was the spring before Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* was released. The hit-man character had been in movies before, certainly since *film noir* began. The killer/executioner was not an unknown character nor was the mentor/apprentice relationship. But *Jerry & Tom* turns it on its ear; it's anti-Mafia, satirizing it in an attempt to sum it up." The motivation for this was the attraction of the moral centre of the story. Rubinek admits easily that at one point, he would happily watch any kind of film, including the big action movies with gratuitous violence. But there came a point when violence began to bother him and it coincided with the arrival of his children. "It didn't bother me in terms of wanting it to be censored, I just didn't want to see it a lot," he offered by way of an explanation. This bothering point, it would seem, is epidemic among key Boomer players. Atom Egoyan has described how he would have thought twice about doing *The Sweet Hereafter*, if he had already had his son.

The slickness of the hit-man genus was having a cumulative affect on Rubinek. "Bad guys were good-looking young men or women dressed in Armani suits, committing genocide with impunity as long as they had a self-deprecating sense of humour. This was irritating, if not reprehensible or immoral." His response is a morality tale that contains zero on-screen violence. It is a psychological study of an older guy (Tom) who lives his life, keeping his work separate from his family. He has a moral code, he's a very likable person, and believes he can actually get away with murder. The younger person (Jerry) is an innocent for whom the lines between work and life blur because he isn't fortified with the same delusions of compartmentalization. "Jerry is, in a way, a much more honest person. When Tom realizes he has aided and abetted the creation of a monster, he begins to see the monster in himself and tries to backtrack. But it's too late and they both end up where you always thought they would both end up."

Jerry & Tom has more to do with John Sayles and Jim Jarmush than anything Tarantino. It is a simplistic journey into corruption punctuated with the theatrical charm of sliding scene changes which necessitated actors running behind the camera changing costume and makeup as the camera panned from summer to winter in single, nonstop shots. Rubinek has created a cinematic ellipsis that allows the audience to arrive at its own perception of the story. He says he wants only to present, not instruct. He strenuously avoids instructing with "an Oliver Stone-like moral point of view." And he allows for this to happen, starting with the opening scene, which sets up the style of the whole movie in a seven-and-a-half-minute take that is a slow sucker shot for viewers who want to jump to conclusions, only to realize that they have jumped too soon. "That scene took nine-and-a-half hours of rehearsal. It was done on a slow-moving dolly moving on a dance floor with 30-to-40 marks on it that had to be hit in sequence with the lines. That's a choreographed dance between actors and camera and script and, ultimately, it comes down to letting it all happen in the moment. The best of you comes out when you have the humility to leave it alone."

Directing has a certain attraction for him, but Rubinek appears to enjoy dodging the usual ego flex of his new title, preferring instead

to wrap himself in the burden of responsibility. He emulates what he saw on the set of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. "Eastwood is a man for whom self-indulgence was an anathema. He never spoke to actors except technically, making them totally responsible for their roles. If you didn't know what he looked like, it would have taken you half-an-hour to figure out where Eastwood was. He usually was right in the middle of it."

"Just to be provocative," says Rubinek, "I joke about directing being highly overrated. People protest, and I say, I didn't write it, light it, design it, act in it, develop the film, and I didn't cut it. I guess I must be the director. As a result, the true values of directing are very often underestimated. Once you've chosen what to do and the people to work with, you've done most of your work. If you haven't done the first part well, if the vicissitudes of fortune haven't allowed you to do it well, then you've got a hell of a job in front of you because you're going to have to do everybody's job. I chose extraordinary people to work with. I was very lucky."

So is God laughing? Rubinek thinks not, claiming *Jerry & Tom* is just a little film, as if diminishing its profile will lessen its target value. "Let's see if this makes any money at the box office." ●