

The **SLATE**

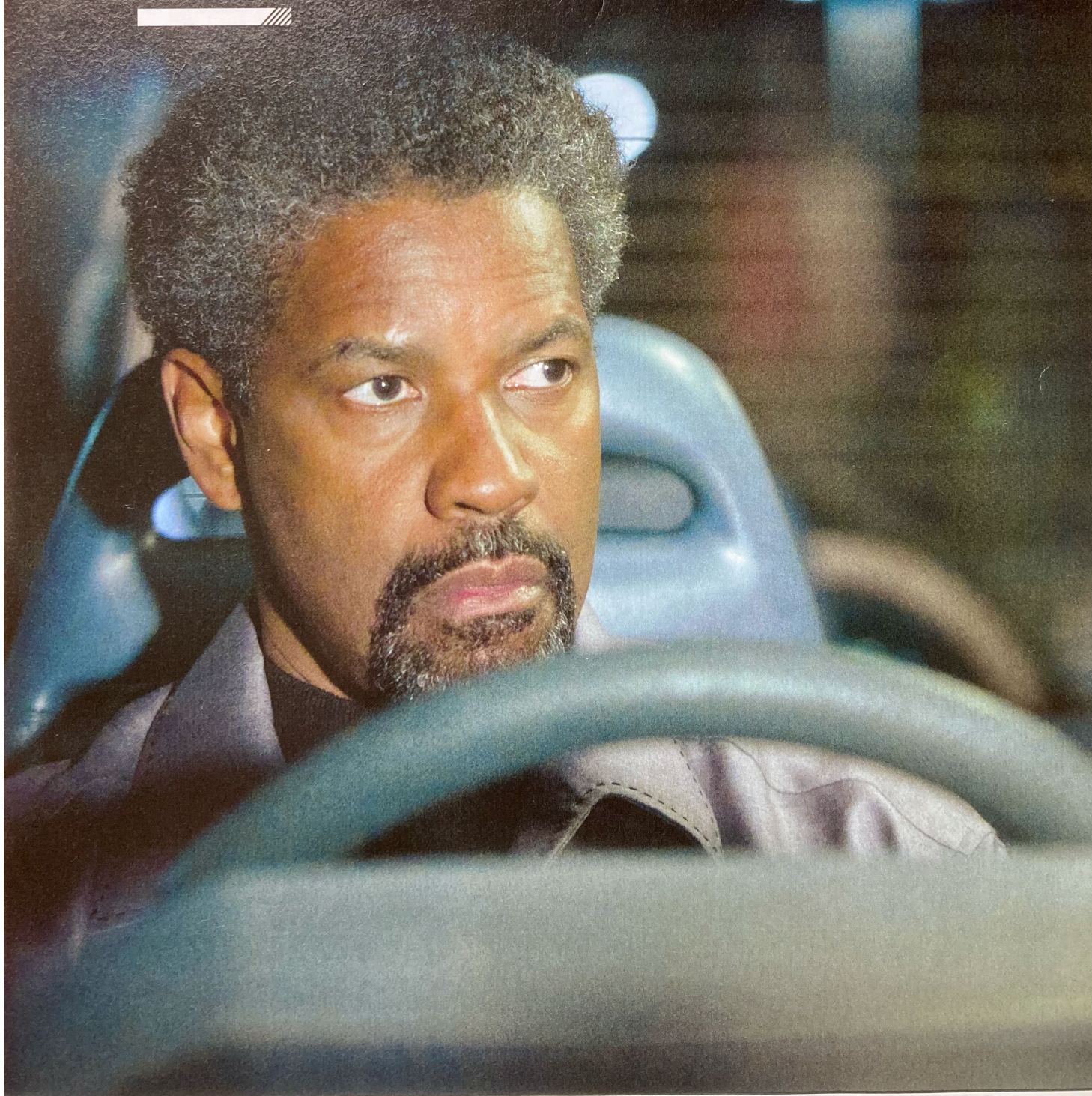
THINGS
WE'VE
LEARNED

UK film company Revolver hired **Morgan Freeman** as the voice of their phone system. **Tim Robbins** was hired to clean the toilets, but hasn't been seen since.

FIRST LOOK

SAFE HOUSE

It's Denzel vs. Ryan Reynolds!



Pride of place on this month's reading list goes to *Hellraisers*, a graphic novel adap of **Empire** contributor **Robert Sellers'** book about the boozy exploits of Harris, Burton, O'Toole and Reed. Comes with a free liver.

Denzel in the driving seat: Washington's Frost plays mind games with backseat passenger Matt Weston (Ryan Reynolds). Right: The action moves outside.



DENZEL WASHINGTON HAS BEEN READING ABOUT

sociopaths. "I've learned quite a bit!" he enthuses to a quizzical **Empire**. "One of the books is excellent, called *The Sociopath Next Door*. It's all about the desire to win; to affect situations; to manipulate..." He smiles, for the longest time. It's frankly unnerving.

The reason for Washington's sudden, and possibly unhealthy, research is *Safe House*, a CIA thriller filming in Cape Town that witnesses an uneasy teaming of his rogue agent with Ryan Reynolds' greenhorn recruit. Charged with protecting a generally uneventful base of operations (the safe house of the title), Reynolds' Matt Weston is coasting on fumes, until one of the most infamous, experienced, and now rogue members of the Agency, Washington's Tobin Frost, is entrusted into his custody. "I'm looking to win and to get away and dominate in any way I can," says Washington.

"Denzel's character embodies everything my character despises," the less intense Reynolds elaborates, "but by the end we're left wondering if Matt is going that same route. What Matt loathes most about Frost is that he sees him in himself and doesn't want to admit it. But as they go on the run together and he watches the walls close in, he realises he's now a target of the same agency he stood up for."

Cape Town is a vibrant and attractive city, but we're not in its most salubrious area. The night shoot **Empire** attends is taking place in an almost derelict tenement building next to the Salt River Metrorail station: a busy intersection with regular trains rattling past. The decaying neighbouring buildings on Portland Road sport the local yoot dancing to radios in

crumbling doorways, and the action we're here to witness is confined in a grimy room with greenish walls and furniture with escaping stuffing. It's a suitably gnarly location for a scene that sees Washington brutally dispatching two thugs sent to intercept him, repeatedly

smashing one stunt guy into an ever-more battered sideboard before shooting him at point-blank range. "We haven't done a scene with a page of dialogue in a month," growls Washington. "There's a lot of running and jumping in this film, and I've got a bad knee, and I got waterboarded! Having somebody pour water down your nose when you're upside-down is a bit difficult, although the guys doing it to me were more scared than I was, I think."

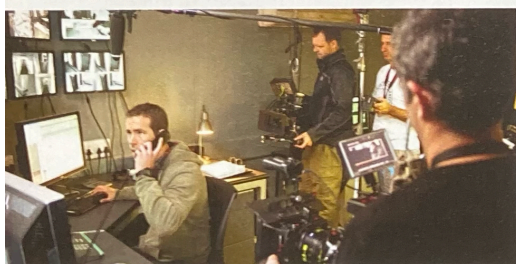
"WE HAVEN'T DONE A SCENE WITH DIALOGUE FOR A MONTH!"
Denzel Washington, Tobin Frost

Good news, **Harlan Ellison**: you've won your lawsuit against Fox to be credited with inspiring In Time. Bad news, Harlan Ellison: you now have a credit on In Time.

Meanwhile, last night, Reynolds was scrapping in an alleyway that, **Empire** can attest, is barely wide enough to accommodate one person. "I was fighting that guy for five hours," he wearily confides, "and we're finishing it later. The fights in this movie are really long and extensive, and they're ugly and there's biting and head-butting. Canadian kung fu, we call it. I keep seeing a stunt guy dressed like me but they don't seem to want to put him in. I'm a wreck, but then I get to say, 'That's me getting my ass kicked by a 300lb mercenary...'"

Cape Town has recently been doubling for Judge Dredd's Mega City One, but in *Safe House* it's playing itself. "I lived in Maputo in the '90s, and we used to visit

Main: Frost and Weston in reflective mood. Below: Reynolds on set.



Johannesburg," laughs 34 year-old director Daniel Espinosa (who turned Hollywood heads with his Swedish debut, *Snabba Cash*). "This is nothing. This is a tourist destination!" David Guggenheim's screenplay originally took place in South America, but Espinosa felt that a new location was needed.

"It's a 'new' landscape," he explains. "It has different socio-economic problems that you can have in the background of the movie. This movie relates in many ways to the tradition of the thrillers from the 1970s, and what was interesting in those semi-action movies like *The French Connection*, was that the political climate of the country was always felt. It wasn't like a non-space where most American action films take place now, where they just use New York or LA as a nice set. I wanted something more."

That's not to say that *Safe House* is a political film. "I'd call it an action thriller if I worked for Netflix," says Reynolds, "but it has a whole bunch of other dynamics. It has an unusual feel to it: there's no CGI and it's very real. I think it really

causes an audience to lean in. The driving is pretty intense; I've killed that poor 1988 BMW 20 times over. But I'm always drawn to characters first, and I liked that there's this hubris associated with these guys that enter agencies like the CIA thinking that it's some romantic journey into a love of God and country, and it's actually incredibly disillusioning."

And what of working with Washington, particularly when he's in full-blown sociopath mode? "He's very Method," whispers Reynolds, as Washington departs for another battering. "He's living, eating, breathing and sleeping this character. I have to always call him Frost, and he calls me Matt. It's adorable."

When *Empire* speaks to Washington, we don't call him Frost. But then, he doesn't seem to be entirely in character either. At least, that is, until we ask how much of himself is in Frost. "How much of your self is in that question?" Washington asks, suddenly intense. Before *Empire* can enquire as to the location of the nearest trousers emporium, he laughs and we relax. "See, that's what a sociopath does: they'll find an opening and dig right in there and turn your words around on you! I certainly don't see myself as the villain in this; I think I'm right! I guess I'm not very warm and fuzzy, but I'm not worried about that. Nobody looks at a movie and goes, 'Man, that was awful but he seems like a nice guy!'" (laughs). Talking

to you like this is highly unusual for me. But when you read other articles about how much of a pain in the ass I was, you can set the story straight..."

We will, sir. We will...

Safe House is out on February 24, 2012.

4 movie houses*

* Which are definitely not safe

The House That Dripped Blood

Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing and a vampiric Jon Pertwee starred in this Hammer portmanteau piece about a country house where "terror waits for you in every room". And that's just what the official listing had to say.

House Of 1000 Corpses

Rob Zombie's gruffest focussed on a lovely fixer-upper with real potential... if it weren't for the family of psychos who seem hellbent on killing any and all visitors. Lovely kitchen, though.

The Last House On The Left

If Wes Craven's not having nightmares on suburban streets, he's overseeing bloody vengeance in a nice lake house. Remind us never to stay over at his.

Big Momma's House

The most horrifying house of them all. Not recommended to buy or rent.

"DENZEL'S VERY METHOD. IT'S ADORABLE."

Ryan Reynolds, Matt Weston