The Den of Geek interview: Stellan Skarsgard

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A star in his homeland since the age of 16, Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård has enjoyed an inexorable rise in Hollywood's estimation over the last ten years, winning acclaim - and often awards - for his work both in mainstream blockbusters such as the Pirates Of The Caribbean films (where he played the seaweed-festooned Bootstrap Bill), Deep Blue Sea, Ronin and Insomnia and also for smaller films such as Breaking The Waves and Good Will Hunting.

His new film, the dark thriller/horror Waz, finds him playing a hard-boiled detective on the trail of a sadistic maniac. It was a gruelling role, but at least, unlike his participation in the Exorcist prequel, he only had to make the film once…

Eddie Argo is very much a Popeye Doyle-style detective. Did that reverence for 1970s films like The French Connection provide an enjoyable aspect to playing the character?

I enjoyed being in that tradition, in a way, and I thought of Popeye Doyle of course, but I also thought of the character that I did in Insomnia, which was also a kind of tormented policeman, like a pressure-boiler with a lot of stuff going on and not showing it. It's really interesting to play those characters that are not allowed to 'show'.

You've often talked about the Hollywood films you do because they're fun and well-paid, and the smaller films that are more challenging for you. Where does Waz fit into those categories? Was it a commercial project for you?

No! It doesn't pay my bills [laughs]. This was because it was an interesting role. It was an interesting subject also, because the subject is love, and there's actually an interesting discussion about empathy and about love in it. It was Shankland that made me do it. He's a first-time director, and I've done quite a few of them. I meet them and I talk to them and I feel 'Is there something going on there?' and Shankland turned out to be a very smart man, and I trusted him and I also felt that he had an urge to tell something. I hoped that he would be able to create a universe of his own, and he did.

Do you always approach a role in that way…that rather than taking a script at face value, you want to meet up first and feel your way?

Often, yes. Especially with first-time directors. I can say yes to some directors without even reading a script. But the first-time directors I've worked with, the scripts have not been perfect, but they had something that I liked. Like Insomnia, which was also with a first-time director, with a man who had an energy and an urge to tell something that I trusted. You work on a script and you discuss it, and eventually, hopefully, you get somewhere.

As both Waz and Goya's Ghosts deal with torture, I wonder if it's a subject you feel compelled to discuss in your work, and that you feel strongly about?

You mean what's going on in the United States? Of course I feel very strongly about it. I mean…mankind has for hundreds of years known that torture is not a very smart way to get information. It's horrible that we're going back to medieval times.

Do you think that what they call 'torture porn' is validating or countering this kind of 'new torture', at a cultural level?

I don't know – personally I don't watch many films where the violence itself is the main entertainment, because I find them boring.

So you haven't seen Saw or any of the others in that canon?

No, I haven't seen Saw. Se7en I have seen, but that is not so bad. But if it doesn't serve a function to tell you something about the characters or to shed some light upon a problem…I don't like it. But we're exposed to

more violence in media today than we were just a couple of decades ago, but I don't think that in itself is making torture more probable.

I just read a book by a man called Goldhagen, 'Hitler's Willing Executioners'. That was a very specific period in a specific country in specific circumstances, but the thing is, we're all capable of it. And that's why we have to be so extra on-our-guard and so firm in our refusal to go backwards in time and start torturing people and giving in any way infringements on human rights that we have managed to establish – in spite of everything- through centuries of work.

Did it concern you to be involved in a film with so much potential for the kind of prurient and voyeuristic take on torture that we now see so much of?

Of course. Shankland and I come from different corners of the ring, shall we say, into this project. We discussed it a lot. I think that the violence in it –and it's probably the most violent film I've made – serves a purpose. It is this absolutely horrible violence that stands against the idea of love. In discussions from day one, for the essence of the film it was important that the violence was believable and not pleasant. Not entertainment. Which also means that you show violence but you leave enough to the imagination of the audience to fill in and create something even more horrible than you can show. So we discussed it, and there's less blood than there was in the original idea, and some of the prosthetics that were made were not even used.

Were you particularly attracted to the Bergman-esque pondering on love in Waz?

Yes – I'm very much Scandinavian in the sense that I like those questions.

Are you generally attracted to these dark themes?

I'm a very light-hearted man in many ways, but I am attracted to them because I think they're important. I just finished a film for the BBC called God On Trial, which is why my hair is so short, because I play a Jew in Auschwitz, and I've been going back to the Nazi period over and over again, not only for the projects that I've done, taking different sides and different characters, but also to fathom how we human beings work. Not just to understand the mechanisms of our brains, but to be aware. To make sure that we don't get into those situations again.

The first time I saw István Szabó's Mephisto, I came out and I was in shock. I was shaking. It was about this actor Gründgens, who stayed in Germany and worked and was the pet of the Nazis. I couldn't swear what I would have done. And then the friend that I saw the film with said 'Oh, that traitor Gründgens – collaborator!'. And I got ice-cold and I looked at my friend, and I thought 'That could be you', because he was so sure of himself, that he was right. He didn't question, and that is what we have to do constantly.

I'm interested in moral questions. I'm interested in the human condition in general. And of course I'm interested in love – is there empathy? Personally I think there is love, and it's a fantastic and beautiful thing. It is based on genetics but it has gone beyond genetics, because sometimes it really doesn't serve any function at all [laughs].

Besides your professional ability to assume a character, what defines the 'Stellan-ness' that draws people to cast you?

I'm on time. That's really good! And I function socially very well on a set. Sometimes I feel like I'm brought onto the set like a…you know, when they run the bulls in Pamplona, they also have some castrated bulls to calm them down! [laughs]. Sometimes I feel like the castrated bull that is thrown in to calm down a set and create a good atmosphere! I hope that's not why I'm hired, though.

Milos Forman said that he liked me because I had no face of my own. He saw me in different roles that I'd done, but he didn't see me as an actor bigger than my roles.

Actors say that you're very generous with them, never playing the star. Is that down to the many years of theatre that you did?

It's not concerned with the theatre necessarily. I want the film to be as good as possible, I want the scene to be as good as possible, and I like actors. The scene is never better than the weakest link, so I don't have to be brilliant. I can be a little less good if it makes the other person good. Then the scene becomes better and everybody's happier.

I hate doing monologues. I hate doing solos, and I hate watching solos, when there are several actors onstage or on the screen. I want to see what happens between people. That's the most interesting thing.

Which of the two Exorcist prequel-versions that you shot remains the more effective for you?

They're two totally different films. Of course, Paul Schrader's film is closer to me. And of course, they didn't want that. It was such a weird idea to – on a fifty-million dollar film – have him as the director and me as the star. I thought 'Those producers – they're either really really smart or they have no clue!'. With him…it would never become a horror movie. It would just become a film about a man in crisis, because that's what he's good at – that's what I'm good at!

So they got that of course, and they didn't like it because it wouldn't sell enough tickets, and then Renny Harlin was brought in. They wanted to cut up Schrader's film and put in…slices of horror, which would have made it insane. Renny wanted to make his own film, and I was with him on that tract. I like Renny – sometimes better than his films! [laughs] He' s a nice Finnish guy and we have fun together. I changed my make-up so they couldn't use anything from the first film for the second film.

Personally I wished that they could have spent a little more money on the second one, because that needed better effects and stuff. Like those hyenas – they're terrible. [laughs]

You and Peter Stormare are amongst the most prolific actors listed in the IMDB. Is this evidence of a strong Scandinavian work ethic?

Yeah, we like to work. We're good work-horses.

The journey you made in Waz looked very gruelling. Was it one that taxed you a lot emotionally, or was it a technical issue?

I never see it as technical, and I try to avoid the technical side of it, because I know that I'm technically very skilled – I try to fuck up my performance so I can't use it. But it was very very hard work. We shot six days a week, twelve-hour shoots, and we actually shot for twelve hours, because it was all hand-held, which meant that you didn't sit down for twelve hours.

And that was great, because it meant that we could experiment with the scenes and get a fantastic amount of material. The emotionally hardest part was, of course, the three last days of the shoot, where we did the ending. Because then you had to be, for three days, in an emotional and physical state that is pretty painful.

Is that level hard to sustain between takes, when they're re-setting the camera, and so forth?

What you do is that you don't stay in the exact emotion but you stay in the energy of it. So you have your engine running at high speed constantly throughout the day, and then you just turn it on to whatever feeling you want to.

You say that you feel a lot of fear when acting – is that a useful tool for you?

No.

It's just a by-product that you have to put up with, then?

Yeah, and one that you have to fight, because if you're afraid, if you're not brave in front of the camera, you can't produce anything. Fear shrinks you, and I see nothing good in it. The only good thing is that it might scare you to prepare a little better [laughs].

Did something happen in the theatre or a previous production that you don't want to happen again?

Well I had camera fright. I didn't film for a couple of years. I couldn't stand in front of the camera. The camera was threatening, and my enemy. I just got stiff in front of it, and I can sometimes feel this coming back like a ghost from the past, and that is horrible, because you can do nothing.

Is that perhaps one reason why you're such a good contributor to a group – that you feel more secure in a group of actors?

Yeah, that's very possible, that I need to feel that I'm amongst friends. That they want me to be good and that they forgive me when I'm not.

Is this insecurity restricted to the stage and set?

I'm not very insecure in my own life. I trust people and I like people…but it's something about this acting thing. It's such a fucking pretension, to ask people to pay to look at you, at what you're doing. So it better fucking be something, you know! [laughs] It's scary. I don't trust actors who are never scared – they usually like themselves too much, and they become some kind of wankers.

Fucking up your own performance deliberately, though – what comes out of that?

Life. If you prepare your role at home, in detail, and go and execute it, you will get a shiny surface that might be brilliant and elegant and everything, but it's not life. Life is erratic and full of flaws. And the hardest thing to produce on-screen is life. It's a two-dimensional picture, and you've got to make it vibrate beyond that.

I was having a look at the message boards on your IMDB page, where a great number of women in their early twenties are fixated with you –

Nice to hear.

-- and one wrote "Stellan fills me with the desire to go out and do wrong". [Stellan laughs] What do you feel about that kind of adulation?

Who says it's wrong?

I've heard you downplaying your singing abilities in many interviews, and yet you've just shot Mamma Mia…?

Yes, my first musical. Oh, that was scary! It's very weird because I didn't have the tools for that. I've never done anything like it. When I came and started rehearsing it, I thought 'How does this work?'. You come in

one body as a character, and then suddenly this body starts to do silly steps and dance. Is it some kind of alienation, as Brecht said? What is it? And Phyllida Law just looked at me and laughed. Eventually I just gave up everything and decided to have a lot of fun, and I had a lot of fun…and I hope it works!

Would you like to do more lighter things…comedies, maybe?

Some comedy would be fun, yeah.

Do you get offered many?

No, probably because I've done too many dark things. But no, I don't get offered comedy.

Have you done much comedy in the theatre?

I did some stuff in the theatre, yeah. But Boogie Woogie that's coming out now, or soon; that might be fun. I hope it's fun. If it's not funny, I'll never get into a comedy!

Do you think you'll get round to directing movies?

I really enjoy acting and I don't feel that I have to be able to write and direct on my business card. But if there's a project, a story that I feel I have to tell, then I might do it. But I'm interested in everything. Me on a film set, I'm interested in everything the director does, the make-up girls, the sound department, the DP…every detail I'm thinking of, and interested in.

So you're ready for the role?

It's one thing to be a Mister Know-It-All on the set than actually to take responsibility for the entirety.

You're working with your son in Metropia – does working with your children bring echoes of your own early life as an actor?

It's strange, because I never encouraged them. My ideology has been that I do what I can up to the age of sixteen, and then it's their lives to decide for themselves, and hopefully I've turned them into good human beings. But it worries you when they decide to become actors because I throw quite a heavy shadow that they have to get out of.

Fortunately, they've done very well. Alexander and Gustaf, the two oldest who are now actors, they're extremely successful, both of them, and in their own way and with their own language. There's no clonings of me, and they don't try to imitate me or anything. Both have gone slightly different ways than I have. Alexander's gone into film and hasn't done my theatre thing. I never went to drama school but Gustaf did four and a half years in drama school, so they've found other ways.

But it's a fantastic feeling when you work with them, which I've done a couple of times, and you meet them and you realise how…when you talk about a scene, the distance is shorter, because in some ways even if you never talked about work at home, you realise that you think the same way about the material usually.

You've been a very successful actor since you were sixteen, but not a Hollywood star for all that time – do you think if you had achieved your current level of stardom so much earlier, that you wouldn't be so down to earth?

It's very hard to say. You're formed by your life but you're also formed very strongly by your first years. My parents' attitude was that we should know that there was no-one in the world who was worth more than we were, and no-one in the world that was worth less. A humanistic, egalitarian view of things.

I got famous in Sweden when I was sixteen years old, but I had very solid parents and I immediately saw the silliness of all the fame. Very early on I made sure that the press version of Stellan Skarsgård shouldn't get too far away from the person Stellan Skarsgård.

So you would never have moved to the USA, out to Hollywood?

No, I don’t think so. And I also need to have a normal life. What is stardom? That’s a silly thing. You have one life – and it’s surprisingly short!

Waz is on general release from today. Check out our review here; and our interview with director Tom Shankland here.