

“A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE”
PRODUCTION NOTES

NOTE TO PRESS:

As this film is screening well in advance of its theatrical release date around the world, we ask in the interest of the enjoyment of the film by future moviegoers that you not reveal any of the dramatic plot twists or character developments when writing/broadcasting your pieces.

Thank you.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen) is living a happy and quiet life with his lawyer wife (Maria Bello) and their two children in the small town of Millbrook, Indiana, but one night their idyllic existence is shattered when Tom foils a vicious attempted robbery in his diner. Sensing danger, he takes action and saves his customers and friends in the self-defense killings of two-sought-after criminals.

Heralded as a hero, Tom's life is changed overnight, attracting a national media circus, which forces him into the spotlight. Uncomfortable with his newfound celebrity, Tom tries to return to the normalcy of his ordinary life only to be confronted by a mysterious and threatening man (Ed Harris) who arrives in town believing Tom is the man who's wronged him in the past. As Tom and his family fight back against this case of mistaken identity and struggle to cope with their changed reality, they are forced to confront their relationships and the divisive issues which surface as a result.

A History of Violence is directed by acclaimed filmmaker David Cronenberg (*Crash, Spider, Dead Ringers*) from a screenplay by Josh Olson. The film stars Viggo Mortensen (*The Lord of the Rings, Hidalgo*), Maria Bello (*The Cooler*), William Hurt (*The Village, Oscar-winning Kiss of the Spider Woman*), Ed Harris (*Pollack*) and Ashton Holmes.

The film is produced by Chris Bender and JC Spink of Benderspink (*The Butterfly Effect, Monster-in-Law*) with Justis Greene, Roger E. Kass and Josh Braun serving as executive producers.

The motion picture shot in Toronto and in various countryside locations, including Millbrook, Ontario for 11 weeks from September through to November 19th, 2004.

New Line Cinema will release *A History of Violence* on September 30th, 2005.
The film will make its world premiere at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival in May.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

When Producer JC Spink read John Wagner and Vince Locke's graphic novel A History of Violence, he immediately recognized its film potential. Spink and his producing partner Chris Bender were inspired by the internal struggle the main character faces. The team, who has a first look deal with New Line Cinema, presented the project to the studio, which responded with enthusiasm and secured the rights. Josh Olson wrote the screenplay, which he extrapolated from the novel, published six years previously by Paradox Press, which also published Road to Perdition.

"The title was intriguing," says Olson. "It sparked a lot of ideas. What would happen to real people in this situation was my approach." Olson developed the characters using the book as a launching pad. "It's a wrong-man scenario. A man must prove his innocence to a group of bad men."

Director David Cronenberg, who joined the project in the winter of 2003, found the screenplay compelling. "Loosely based on the graphic novel, Josh's script is a Midwest American small town story," says Cronenberg. "There was something classic about it without being imitative."

Adds Olson, "What really interested me about the story was taking this classic middle America family and putting them into an extreme situation, and show how it affected them – what happens when you inject violence into an ordinary, happy household."

Although he doesn't normally undertake family dramas, Cronenberg felt for the characters and the Stall family. "It does have a powerful emotional resonance.

A married couple with two kids are trying to live an open, straightforward honest life, and finding it difficult to do that. So I fell for that classical element.”

“It’s mainstream to a certain extent, but it has some very disturbing and interesting undercurrents,” continues the director, whose unique body of work has been acclaimed around the world. “I thought it was an interesting kind of thriller, because it’s not a normal kind of thriller. It’s like a Hitchcock thriller where an innocent man is mistaken by some very scary people for someone else and drawn into a world that he’d rather not know anything about. His life and the lives of his family are endangered because of this mistaken identity. The film clicks into several intriguing things, but then derails in a very interesting way,” observes Cronenberg, who collaborated on revisions with Olson, changing the organized crime members’ names to from Italian to Irish in order to distance them from the mafia, among other alterations.

“A lot of David’s movies have to do with identities, what’s real and what’s not,” remarks producer Chris Bender. “What ties this movie to his others is Viggo Mortensen’s character Tom Stall, who is struggling with an identity problem and questioning the reality he is living.”

“Although *A History of Violence* is not a typical studio film, in some broad ways, it ties in thematically with David’s interests, but it really doesn’t feel like anything he’s done before,” says screenwriter Josh Olson.

Once New Line Cinema gave the project a green light, the production set up offices in Toronto, Canada, Cronenberg’s home town where he remains loyal to his “family of collaborators” – key crew members who have worked with him over the years.

Among them is Director of Photography, Peter Suschitzky (*Spider*, *eXistenZ*), working on his seventh film with Cronenberg, who notes, “When I first read the

script, I knew it was quite different and more narrative-driven than anything that David had tackled before. To encourage him to take it, I asked him to think about the movies of Fritz Lang because one of the main themes running through Lang's movies was that of a character who can't escape his fate – an interesting link.”

Clearly Cronenberg was hooked, as he enlisted Viggo Mortensen and Maria Bello to join the cast, his first choice to play the married Stall couple. And Ed Harris and William Hurt are among his favorite American actors with whom he'd wanted to work for years.

“I couldn't have asked for a better cast. The tone is of seriously good acting, a profound dedication to the roles and digging deep into the characters,” observes the director. Newcomer Ashton Holmes was selected from 100 candidates who auditioned in Los Angeles and Toronto for the role of the son. Six-year old Heidi Hayes, a local discovery, completed the family group.

Rounding out the cast are Stephen McHattie (*The Dark, Life with Billy*) who partnered with Greg Bryk (*Men with Brooms, ReGenesis*) to set the tone of the film in the shocking opening scenes, foreshadowing what is to come. Cronenberg alumus Peter MacNeill (*Crash, Rabid*) plays the local sheriff.

“Viggo was very deliberate and thoughtful before he chose to do this movie,” points out producer Chris Bender. “He met with David a number of times. He really wanted to understand the script and the transformation his character undergoes. It was really about him falling in love with this character before he decided to do it.”

The director initially met Mortensen at a party for *The Lord of the Rings* at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival where they both agreed that they should work together. Cronenberg thought that the script of *A History of Violence* would be really right for Mortensen. Subsequently, the two met in Los Angeles to discuss

it in detail: the character, what changes Cronenberg wanted to make and what worried or didn't worry Mortensen or didn't make sense to him. "We found that we were very much in sync," says the director. "Viggo does his homework and thinks about things a lot. He helped to create his character. I always go through a script after I've brought in the cast to make it feel more natural for them. It's very collaborative."

Responds Mortensen, "I don't think I've ever felt more like I was on the same wavelength with a director as I am with David. I like his way of telling a story. He not only shows a wholly original knack for entertaining audiences with a good psychological drama, but he also allows an audience to ask itself difficult questions about the nature of violence and confusion of identity."

"David has found more layers or allowed us to find more than I thought were there in the script. In this story you really see the complicated effects an incidence of violence has on a lot of characters in this small community and beyond it," says the charismatic actor.

Screenwriter Josh Olson agrees. "The situation forces them to ask some very hard questions about themselves and their relationship. It changes their family forever when they have to confront these issues."

He adds, "In this movie, things are not what they seem, we are not what we believe we are, the world is not necessarily what it seems to be on the surface. And when things start to go wrong, Tom Stall has to look inside himself while those closest to him wonder who he is, as Tom changes from his normal, peaceful loving self in order to deal with the violence that he encounters.

Mortensen adds, "It's also about Tom's wife Edie, and another side of herself. It's about their son Jack and another side of himself."

“Viggo’s my kind of actor,” smiles Cronenberg, who likes to work with actors who are not just leading men, but also character actors. “First of all they tend not to be afraid because they’re not trying to protect some image they see of themselves as traditional leading men, but also it gives them a much bigger palette to paint from because they have all kinds of edges. I need a kind of eccentricity that is more typical of a character actor than a leading man, and yet still has a leading man presence and charisma.”

“Viggo was perfect. He is not only a charismatic leading man, but the combination of other qualities made me feel he had the depth to play a very complex role. He is a maniac for detail, which I love. He is very focused and obsessed with details of how his character would move, speak and dress. It’s really quite spectacular to watch him work and to interact with him,” says the director, who admits, that after two weeks of working closely with Mortensen, they felt like brothers.

Mortensen’s commitment translated to a collection of artifacts he purchased in the Midwest on his travels, which included ducks and a bank in the shape of a fish head that says ‘fishin’ money’ on it and is set on the diner’s cash register, posters of Birds of North America, some landscapes, a small ceramic eagle and other animal sculptures for his daughter’s room which he thought Tom’s character would have in his home.”

“Viggo has been very active in helping to create the surroundings that his character will emerge from. That is unique,” says Cronenberg.

When Cronenberg first met Maria Bello in Toronto, she didn’t know about the film. “We were meeting about something else, but all the time I was thinking she would be really good for this story. She and Viggo make a very believable married couple – the age and the tone were right.”

Bello had been a huge fan of Cronenberg's ever since she'd seen *Dead Ringers*. "I thought David would be really bizarre, because of his movies. But he's so down to earth, incredibly intelligent, kind and honest and has so much integrity, I fell in love with him from the get-go," says Bello who knew from the minute they met that she wanted to work with him.

"Maria was a real discovery for me. When I saw her in *The Cooler*, the movie showed what she could do in terms of subtlety, a kind of really vulnerable sexuality that was very real. I thought she could play this very complex, and yet at the same time, simple character, who is a small-town lawyer who embraces the energy, closeness and comfort of a small town with a lot of energy and enthusiasm – not brow-beaten by that but rather empowered by it. I thought she could bring all of those qualities to this character, who, as things unfold in the movie, undergoes some profound changes and discovers hidden aspects of herself. In some ways, it's a mirror image of what Tom Stall's character goes through," explains Cronenberg.

When she first read the script, Bello saw the character as a supportive wife – until the bottom drops out. She subsequently perceived that Edie was more of the man in the family than Tom was. "She had a kind of masculine energy and was in charge. Then when it changes, she is forced back into this feminine receptive, vulnerable place. As soon as I found that shift, I started to look at it differently, and found a whole new perspective on it. She'd been living with this man for 20 years. He's the love of her life, they have a family, and he's the most gentle kind person she's ever met." Then one day...her whole life changes.

Bello muses, "Nothing is ever the way that we think it is. There's always a dimension that's hidden, whether it's in ourselves, and in another person, or happening in the world. There's always this underlying something that we don't control and understand. And David has a way of presenting that which is entertaining, and at the same time, enlightening.

"It's so rare to work with a director who is open to ideas and experience. David's scripts are really lean, because he is interested in the actors filling things out, and he's really let us go on that."

"You really believe Maria as a small-town prom queen who then becomes quite a strong character within that town where she is a highly respected lawyer," says Cronenberg. "I needed all of that, and I needed her also to be a very sexual presence because that is a key element in this story as well. For a role like this, you need to find an actor who is unafraid. It was obvious from *The Cooler* that Maria is not afraid, which was one of the things that attracted me to her as an actress."

"Tom's act of violence provokes changes in Edie. There are some dark sexual scenes which required a particular kind of trust," says Cronenberg. "I think the sex lives of your characters are important. To shy away from it can limit the depth of exploration of the character. I thought it was important to see Maria responding to both the contrasting sex scenes before and after Tom discovers hidden depths of violence in himself."

Says Mortensen, "What happens to Tom and the family changes her. And you know that whatever the outcome is, when these people intrude on this idyllic family setting in this small Midwestern town, that things will never be the same. From the moment that the first outsider walks into that diner, it's over. You see Tom and Edie's relationship suffering under that strain where Tom gradually finds himself unable to deal with the situation that he has been part of setting up – this family, which seems to be functioning so well. But it's not always believable. There are quirky flaws and normal tensions – it's an interesting family dynamic."

Responds Bello, "When we talk about the story being dark, it's really interesting, because we found so much lightness in our relationship with each other and the family in the beginning. So when it starts falling apart, it's shocking."

Mortensen suggests, "They will have to rebuild, retool, re-examine if they want to. They don't have to, but it's an option. In a sense David is saying, if you're not open to re-examining or retooling any relationship, whether it's a couple, a family, a town, or a country such as the United States, there will be consequences. You will eventually pay the price for not taking a good honest look at yourself. I think that's what David's doing without being obvious about it."

Ed Harris joined the cast as the threatening and mysterious Irish Mob figure. "Landing Ed was one of our casting triumphs," says producer Chris Bender. "He's perfect in the role."

"Ed is someone I've admired for years," says Cronenberg. "I thought he had the toughness, the presence and the charisma to carry off this character. I wanted him to be very real, very intense. He thinks he has a history of violence with the main character, which is why he appears in Stall's diner. And that is a critical moment in the movie. Is this a mistaken identity?"

"Ed connected with Viggo in an intense way and was also very serious about the details of everything from the scar, to the eye, to the clothes, to the body language, to the hair to make this character come alive and be real onscreen. So his style just fit in completely perfectly with what had been developed up to that point on the set with Viggo and Maria."

Like the majority of the actors, Harris came aboard the film to work with Cronenberg. Says Harris, "The reason I wanted to work with David is because he's a filmmaker, he knows what he's doing, he has his own vision, and it's just fun to work with people that care about what they're doing. You just know

somebody is in command there. Not that you can't come up with stuff, not that he doesn't listen to new ideas, not that he isn't a collaborator, but ultimately, it's his film. Everybody understands that and I like working that way."

"I was kind of interested in why exactly David wanted to tell this story, a pretty simple story on a certain level. David said he was 'really interested in people's reality, and what is real and what isn't. How people play roles, what that's all about.' And he said 'I just felt this story encompassed a certain dynamic of that'."

"In his hands it's not going to be normal. It's going to be a Cronenberg film and it's going to have his mark on it. It will be pretty interesting, I'm sure," says Harris, who also thought it would be fun to work with Viggo and Maria.

Harris describes his character. "Basically Fogarty (pronounced Faw-garty) is a mobster. He's in an Irish second-class mob outside Philadelphia. He is probably the right-hand guy of the fellow William Hurt plays. And he's coming out to set things right as far as he's concerned."

"When Fogarty shows up on the scene, you're not quite sure what is up, but something is up. Viggo's character has disarmed these two guys trying to rob his restaurant and kills them both and becomes a national hero. He's on TV and my character happens to see this and comes to pay him a visit. In this instance, my character feels that he was done a severe injustice some years ago, and feels it's his right to avenge it."

Mortensen notes, "Fogarty was in the cat bird seat because he could put me on the spot in every take. It was like a fun cat and mouse game. He was scary, which he needed to be. He has to be menacing. Ashton Holmes was a little taken aback at first." Holmes, who portrays Mortensen's son, interjects, "He's one of

those guys who we are afraid to ever run across, but we see him in the flesh in Ed's character."

"Ed was very helpful, not only to me, but to Ashton and the others," offers Mortensen. "He's that kind of actor who really tries to get you to do your best work as an actor. I also liked the fact that he brought a certain amount of humour to it – he was disturbingly funny, as was William Hurt."

Responds Harris, "It's fun. I've got this dead eye and a horrific scar down my face. The guy is kind of creepy. I'm trying to have a good time with it. The challenging part is to do it in some way that it's not like every other guy like this that you have seen in the last 50 years of film. You try to find something for yourself that makes it kind of interesting, that gives a guy a certain little thing. You just try and invest it with some specificity. That's an actor's job."

Producer Chris Bender adds, "Ed said he had fun because he'd never played a gangster before, so it was great for him to play someone menacing. He is an epic actor. His great presence on and off screen translated well to his role of a guy emanating power, fear and ruthlessness. He improvised in one scene, looking like he was going to attack Edie – it scared the hell out of everybody watching the monitor."

Bello recalls the scene. "Ed pushed me as an actor so that the scene became really dynamic. His performances are so stunning and so earthy. They come from such a sensual place."

"William Hurt as the crime boss was another casting coup," states Bender. "We didn't want to play into the cliché mob figure, but cast someone who could make the antagonist more complex. William Hurt brings something so different to playing a gangster, so untypical. His voice as an actor is so unusual, I call what he brings to his part 'Hurtisms.'"

“Richie is certainly a departure for me as a character. He is a criminal. I’ve never done any character anywhere close to that. But I don’t choose the character, I choose the play, in this instance, the screenplay,” says Hurt.

Hurt prepared for his part by working on his Philadelphia accent. “It changes how you enter into a different character physically. My preference is to transform physically, entirely.”

Hurt also longed to work with Mortensen, who met him when Hurt first arrived in town to discuss the characters. “When we got together, it became a six-hour cup of coffee. Bill has a very unique mind and a lot of things to offer,” says Mortensen. “My impression is that he had a lot of fun.”

Hurt smiles, “I was right. I think there is some kinship in our approach to things. Maybe that is one of the reasons David brought us together because there was a similarity in how we approach things. Viggo is not pompous or pretentious. He doesn’t arrive with an entourage. He’s grounded, quirky, and observant. He is artistic. I deeply appreciate that since I basically arrive on the set with my shovel in hand and go to work as well. And I love it when someone else does that.”

Ed Harris agrees: “Viggo is a really nice guy, he’s really bright, and he’s a bit of a renaissance man. He paints, writes poetry and takes photos and speaks at least three languages. He’s very generous and really was involved in this film. He likes to talk about it and make sure we’re on the same page. I’ve enjoyed sharing time with him very much.”

“Viggo’s like an ambassador of the production. He is incredibly generous, and has a wonderful effect of involving everybody,” says Cronenberg.

“William unearthed some incredible subtleties and unexpected layers of meanings from the dialogue, which is exactly what I wanted. As with the Carl Fogarty role, it’s a relatively small role in terms of screen time. But it’s absolutely a critical role. It has to be compelling, convincing, charismatic, scary and profound. So I really needed an actor of great substance to play that role,” states Cronenberg.

Although *A History of Violence* marks Ashton Holmes film debut, he took to it like a duck to water. Says producer Chris Bender, “Ashton’s been really open to exploring the different elements of what his part entails.”

Replies Holmes, “David has just been a dream. He’s really an actor’s director. He’s allowed me to really search for the role myself and is constantly looking for my input, and my own creative juices. He’s allowed them to flow into the character, and he’s always encouraging me to go forward.

“Jack is a 10th grader in Millbrook High School. He’s a kind of a loner. I think he feels more at home with the outcasts, but he is able to blend into both the popular crowd and the outcasts. What sets him apart from everybody is his wit and intelligence. He likes to be more of an outsider and an onlooker.”

“When Tom and his family get wrapped up in this case of mistaken identity, it really affects the family unit. We all respond to what is happening to him. Jack’s character comes in touch with a streak inside him that I don’t think he was aware of before this happened. As an actor, to be able to touch into both the charm and the genuineness as an adolescent, but then to be able to delve into that anger and that violence that adolescence brings was a challenge,” says Holmes.

Cronenberg discusses the nature of violence in the film. “In this film, I wanted the violence to be very realistic, brutal and tight. It was about real brutality and the kind of violence that you would actually see on a street fight, for example,

ungainly and not too graceful, very bloody and not very pretty – the opposite of balletic slow-motion choreographed sequences seen in other pictures.

“The way the violence is structured in this movie narratively, the violence that the main character commits, is all justifiable. So the Tom Stall character is forced into violence when there was really not much of an alternative for him. At the same time, we don’t cover up the fact that the violence that he commits now has very nasty consequences for the people who are the subject of the violence. I think you come away with thinking that violence is an unfortunate but very real and unavoidable part of human existence. And we don’t turn away from it, and you can’t really say that it’s never justified. You can say that it’s never very attractive, though, and that is the approach we’ve taken,” explains Cronenberg.

Mortensen notes, “I think David shows the roots and the consequences of violence, but he doesn’t really dwell on the violence itself. He doesn’t linger on it or glamorize it in any way, which somehow makes it more disturbing. I think he’s saying that violence is never OK. But he’s not saying violence can be avoided completely. In that sense, he’s just showing you life as we humans make it on this planet.”

Chris Bender points out, “The extreme violence that takes place at the diner drives Tom’s internal struggle while affecting everybody from the townspeople to Tom’s family.”

Mortensen presents another view. “It deals not only with violence and confusion or identity in society within a nuclear family, but it also deals with problems of celebrity culture. You see Tom Stall having this situation thrust upon him, to which he reacts instinctively. Violence ensues. He becomes a small town hero congratulated for committing these acts of violence. His son thinks he should be on Larry King. In that sense, David is dealing with a universal problem that’s particularly prevalent in the United States. People are very excited by violence

connected to celebrity.”

“Generally speaking, David has not done a lot of fight sequences in his movies before. But, if anything, that was an advantage in telling this story. It’s disturbingly real. It’s disturbing because the physical action is abrupt and shocking and has ugly consequences,” relates Mortensen. Says Bender, “David is a master in creating suspense, fear and tension.”

William Hurt concurs, “There is a lot of violence in it, but it is approached very much from David’s unique point of view. This is a story about violence, therefore a story about violence in us all. We are all certainly capable of violence.”

Ashton Holmes astutely adds, “I’m sure the majority of our society has the capacity to be very violent under certain circumstances. I think very rarely are we actually faced with that potential, but certainly I think each one of us has something lurking within us, and it could come out.”

Remarks screenwriter Josh Olson, “David is able to tap into very primal ideas and emotions. He goes into something much darker and much deeper, showing us scary things that you can’t just walk away from. He gets very deep inside our darkest psychology and shows it to us without washing it off first. And that can be very frightening.”

Cronenberg responds, “I think a lot of artists are drawn to the dark side of human nature because it’s hidden, it’s unexplored, and you have a desire to shine light in the dark corners. You feel like a detective, and you also feel like someone who is not satisfied with what is presented as normal or a status quo.”

He continues, “I think the desire of an artist, like a scientist, is to not accept at face value what most people accept, but to dig deep underneath the surface of things to see where things originate and what goes on there. So that often leads

you to scary, negative or forbidden stuff. But I don't think the desire is only to know what's negative, it's to know what is real, and there are many layers to reality."

Ed Harris asks, "Why are we enchanted by the dark side of things? It's cathartic, I guess, to be able to watch somebody right a wrong, or to watch somebody's dark side come out and him have to battle between his good side and his dark side. I think most of us do that on a very subtle day-to-day basis. Some people do it, some people don't care, and some people will exist on a darker side, that's where they feel more comfortable. Some people don't even go there, because it scares them."

Maria Bello offers, "What I find interesting in life is that people who have access to their dark side are usually incredibly light human beings, because they're not afraid of that any more. And David can so easily access that part of himself, that he doesn't have to live there, and he doesn't."

She also learned to access her own dark side. "Since I became a mother, I'm more capable of immersing myself in a darkness that I experienced before in my life. But not to this extent. But now I know how to come out of it. And that's really exciting."

Cronenberg's creative team collaborated closely with the director to achieve a unique look and sense of place, but one that grows progressively darker as the film's events unwind.

The costume concept drew on a Middle America look based on a small conventional American town of approximately 1,600 inhabitants, explains Cronenberg, whose colour palette for Maria Bello was warm autumnal colours – browns and beiges.

Production Designer Carol Spier's colour palette was light and airy, but it gets progressively darker and more intense. "The mood is idyllic, setting up the violence. It's a safe protective environment with no bars on the windows. Doors are left unlocked in contrast to Richie's deep broody mansion," says Spier, who has designed 12 films for the director.

Art Director James McAteer remarks, "Although it starts out as a safe feeling film, David changes the feel of that. He leads you down what you think is a known pathway and then he takes a detour. This film starts in a very idyllic, bucolic small town, and then changes drastically as David explores the internal workings of some human being."

"As it's mainly a character study, it's a fairly straightforward film in terms of the sets we built," says Spier. The exterior of Richie's mansion, a replica of a French chateau, formerly a Canadian tycoon's home and now part of York University, was filmed outside Toronto. The interior was built in studio at Toronto Film Studios. "The mansion was played as a bad guy's hangout, so it is very masculine with deep colours, a world removed from the bright Indiana town where Tom Stall runs his diner. The dichotomy was the light and the dark, as the main character's emotional state turns from light to dark," says McAteer.

Cronenberg shot most of the movie using a 27mm lens. "It's quite wide and is not the normal lens you would use for close-ups, but I did use it for close-ups and I think almost 90% of the film was shot with this lens. It's just trying to find a coherent, cohesive visual equivalent to the psychology of the characters and the dynamics of the rooms and how people occupy their spaces."

Cronenberg's specifications for the Midwest American town and the Stall's farm was that they had to have an extremely rural look with a picturesque vista and rolling hills. The rural town of Millbrook, Ontario, was selected because it nestled in a secluded valley, with a main street swooping up the hills on either

side. "It had a small town feel and retained period buildings," explains Location Manager Debra Beers.

Dating back to 1816, when the first mill was built, Millbrook's architectural heritage features a variety of building styles typical of 19th century Ontario. The village remains much as it did 100 years ago, describing itself as "a legacy to Ontario and small town life." The farm satisfied Cronenberg's bucolic yearnings, and to match Toronto to a seedy section in Philadelphia, the production returned to a bar used in *The Fly*.

The 14 locations radiated out from Toronto for up to 90 miles. After shooting the exterior of Stall's diner in Millbrook, the production rebuilt the stores and street in studio right down to such details as cracks and crevices on the tarmac road. Other scenes were shot in a mall open to the public in the small town of Tottenham. A baseball game was filmed in the tiny town of Pottageville. Beers returned to an *eXistenZ* location.

"At this point in my career, I realized that the greatest thing I could do is surround myself with people who are really excellent at what they do. After seeing David's movies and reading the book Cronenberg on Cronenberg, you realize what a master he is," says Maria Bello.

"As dark as the material is, and as dark as a project that this is, the work environment couldn't be more lighthearted and easy-going," observes Ashton Holmes. "David is this wonderfully soft-spoken dad who treats his crew and his movie sets like one big family."

Mortensen agrees. "There is an ease and a relaxed atmosphere on the set with David. He knows that that is a good atmosphere to have. It's good to have someone who is an ally. If a director shows that he too is puzzling his way through it, that helps you feel like a collaborator, like an ally. As prepared as he

is, he is still allowing us and himself to find things as he goes along. As an actor, one feels safe to ask a question. A lot of the crew he has worked with many times. There is a familiarity and a shorthand and he is able to get things done relatively quickly without a lot of rehearsing. He has fun on set which is kind of contagious. He creates an atmosphere where people feel free to experiment.”

Adds Cronenberg, “Actors are the custodians of their own characters. As a director, you really should listen to that. You should allow them to be alive and to collaborate with you. Ultimately you realize that your best collaborators can be your actors.”

The director creates an environment for himself and then for everybody else which is very welcoming and encouraging. “When I invite actors or crew to work on my movies, I feel I am asking them to play in my sandbox, because there is a sense of play. We are throwing things around and crashing things, we’re playing. You cannot lose that childlike sense of play that is at the center of creativity.”

Mortensen points out, “David is definitely someone who is a collaborator and more importantly, makes the actors and the crew feel like they are on a team. He is a director who understands that simple is complicated and that complicated should be simple. That is the hallmark of most of his movies. His stories are really subtle in a deft and uncluttered way. They allow us to look at things that normally we don’t look at which are uncomfortable to deal with.”

Producer Chris Bender notes, “David doesn’t get rattled by little things. He has this incredible kind of silent power, a Zenlike attitude, which allows everyone to work at their peak in terms of their creative input. He also has a very a clear vision and that clarity is his strength.”

“David has a tremendous love for his actors,” continues Bender. “He really respects and appreciates what they bring to the process, so they feel really

comfortable to do what they need to do to explore the character, and he lets them. And then, at the same time, he is able to get exactly what he wants.”

William Hurt couldn't agree more. “David has a great sense of tenderness when you're working with him. At the same time, a great sense of strength. He has that sense of being able to be in control of his vision at the same time as being very very tender about communicating it. So there is a sense of collaboration instead of intimidation.”

What impressed Hurt was the “smoothness” of the set. “You weren't directed so much as you were permitted. It was very surprising to me to feel such ease so quickly. I think that was because I knew he wanted me to go all the way. David is completely focused. And it's a great feeling to be with that depth of concentration.”

Ed Harris adds, “The set is very, very low key. There's no question who is in control, but there is a shorthand because they have all worked with each other before. And so it's a nice environment. One of the more pleasant aspects of it was obviously the people working on the film wanted to be working on it, and had worked for David before. There was a great sense of camaraderie and everybody working for the same purpose. I guess if I was surprised by anything, I felt very welcomed and comfortable.”

Echoes Ashton Holmes: “The environment that David creates is very welcoming. There's not sense of tension; it's a level playing field for everybody involved from the AD's to the actors.”

Even young Heidi Hayes, whose parents run The Central Ontario School of Falconry, got into the spirit and to surprise Mortensen on his birthday, brought her pet barn owl, called Lucy, to set and showed Mortensen how to place it on his gloved hand.

The animal theme prevailed when the film shoot drew to a close. Throughout the shoot, each time Mortensen went to visit his mother, he'd purchase T-shirts sporting various types of fish logos, swimming in turbulent streams. On each visit, he purchased more until soon, nearly the entire crew was garbed in fish T-shirts. Fish Fridays became an event. But the fishiest event took place for the crew group shot when Mortensen and Bello presented boxes of fresh fish so various crew members could hold the red snappers up for the camera, gingerly clutching them between thumb and forefinger. Mortensen, usually unassuming, flourished a flounder – the “big fish.” It was all a bit whiffy, but a wonderful indicator of the camaraderie which prevailed throughout the shoot.

Reflecting on the film's theme, Maria Bello says, “Do we ever really know anyone, do we ever really know ourselves? I think it's just a continual process of revealing ourselves to ourselves. And in the process, being able to have the courage to reveal ourselves to someone else.”

William Hurt poses the question, “Can you change who you are? Is violence, once it's part of your life, inescapable? I think that this film is so powerfully, stylistically made, that the answer to that question is going to be evident.”

Screenwriter Josh Olson concludes, “I'm fascinated by the fiction of everybody's life. Having to come face to face with who you are is a really interesting topic for drama.”

Bello advises, “You have to be constantly on the alert because David goes down a windy road. You don't know which way he's going. There's real violence and blood, and then there's real love, kindness and compassion. It's such a mix of human emotion. I think people will be taken on a journey.”

Ashton Holmes adds, "What I think makes it really compelling is the fact that as an audience, and also as an actor in the story, you're able to really explore the notion between good and evil, and how that plays out in individuals."

"Violence is something that is part of human nature and human history that demands exploring. It's in the newspapers and in our minds every day. So you artistically and creatively feel it's something you have to come to terms with, and hope you deal with it in your creative life and not have to deal with it in your actual day-to-day life," says Cronenberg.

Viggo Mortensen sums up, "David puts a magnifying glass on society and culture in the United States showing in subtle ways the universal themes of the nature of violence, the confusing aspects of the nuclear family and individual identity."