

RONIN





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RONIN

CAST

Robert De Niro as Sam
Jean Reno as Vincent
Natascha McElhone as Deirdre
Stellan Skarsgård as Gregor
Sean Bean as Spence
Skip Sudduth as Larry
Michael Lonsdale as Jean-Pierre
Jan Triska as Dapper Gent
Jonathan Pryce as Seamus

CREW

Directed by John Frankenheimer
Screenplay by J.D. Zeik and Richard Weisz (David Mamet)
Story by J.D. Zeik
Produced by Frank Manusco Jr.
Executive Producer Paul Kelmenson
Associate Producer Ethel Winant
Director of Photography Robert Fraisse
Production Designer Michael Z. Hanan
Edited by Tony Gibbs, A.C.E.
Costume Designer May Routh
Music by Elia Cmiral





Full Throttle *Fin de siècle*

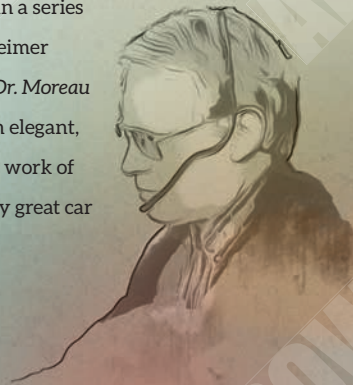
by Travis Crawford


It may seem perverse to refer to a propulsive, testosterone-fueled action film as “elegiac,” but *Ronin* (1998) is suffused with such a sense of twilight melancholy and pre-millennial nostalgia that the term accurately applies. Just in general, director John Frankenheimer’s penultimate theatrical release is an unapologetically old-fashioned caper yarn that also plays as a note-perfect recreation of a formerly ubiquitous genre – the Cold War-era espionage Euro-thriller – that is here enjoying, indeed savoring, its haunting final gasp just prior to being downsized by 21st-century *Bourne*-driven techno-overload. And on that level, *Ronin* represents another lamentably anachronistic category: the mature, R-rated genre film aimed at older adults. Once a staple of 1970s and 80s moviegoing, the adult-driven thriller has gradually been rendered prematurely obsolete by the onslaught of PG-13-classified, family-friendly blockbusters – comic book adaptations, superhero fables, sequels, reboots, and/or franchise fodder – that render much





of its mayhem in the form of cartoonish, bloodless (literally and figuratively) CGI spectacle. The plot of *Ronin* – crafted by J.D. Zeik and then heavily retooled by “Richard Weisz” (a pseudonymously credited David Mamet) – is not necessarily any less contrived or occasionally even preposterous than the tales told by today’s popcorn purveyors, but Frankenheimer and company approach the material with a degree of seriousness and commitment that’s largely absent from current multiplex fare, and while *Ronin* is only (at the time of writing) nineteen years old, it feels – admirably, rewardingly – like a film from a different time, and it plays even better today that it did in 1998. The advantage of retrospect affords other achievements: the film offers what feels like one of the final simultaneously serious and fully engaged dramatic lead performances by a *Heat*/*Jackie Brown*-era Robert DeNiro before he embraced a second career as goofball-for-hire in a series of comedies; in one of his final films, Frankenheimer redeems himself after the disastrous *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996 – not his fault; more on that later) with an elegant, forceful genre masterwork that recalls his best work of the 1960s; and *Ronin* offers one of the final truly great car





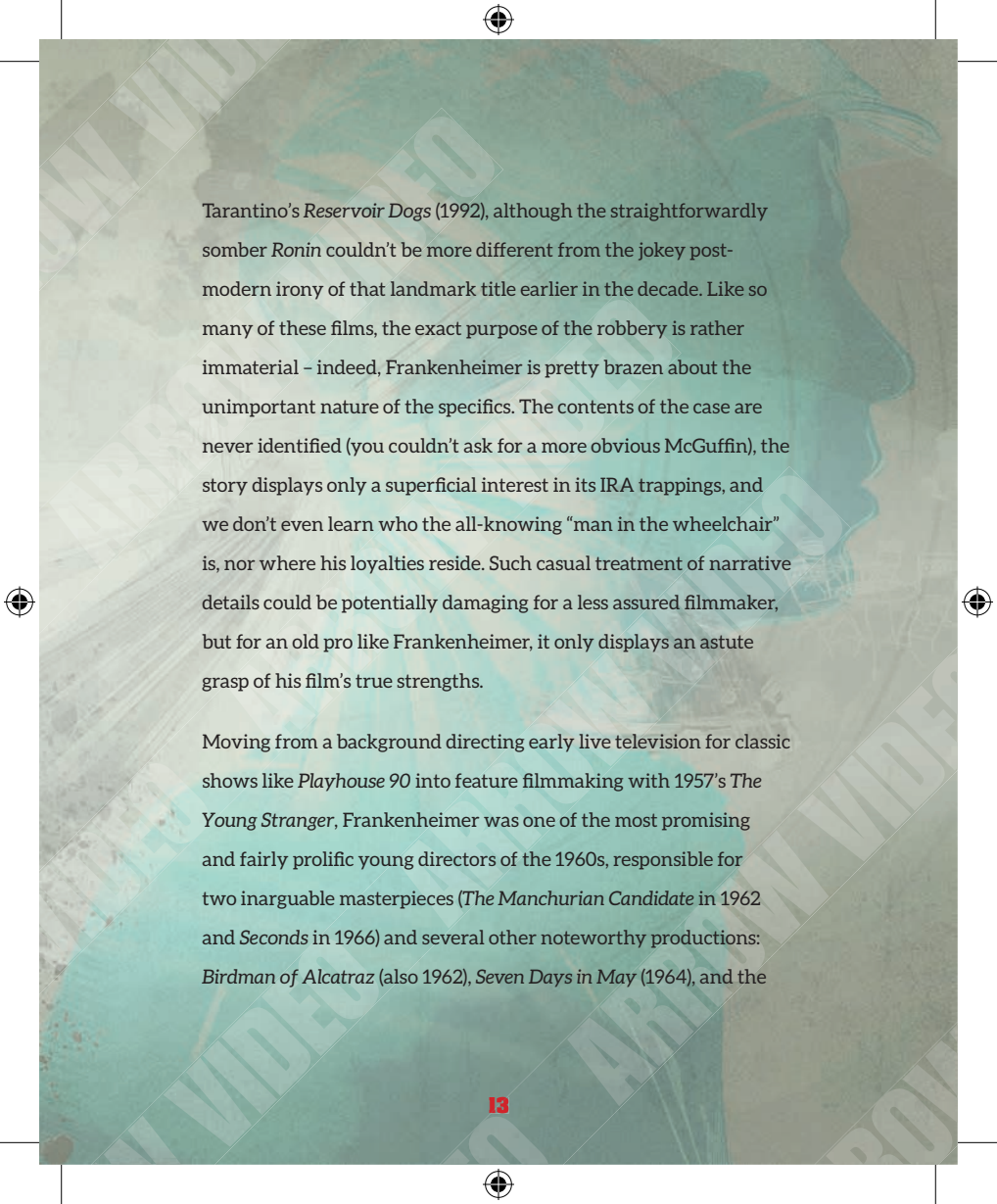
“Everyone’s your
BROTHER
until the RENT
comes due”

VINCENT



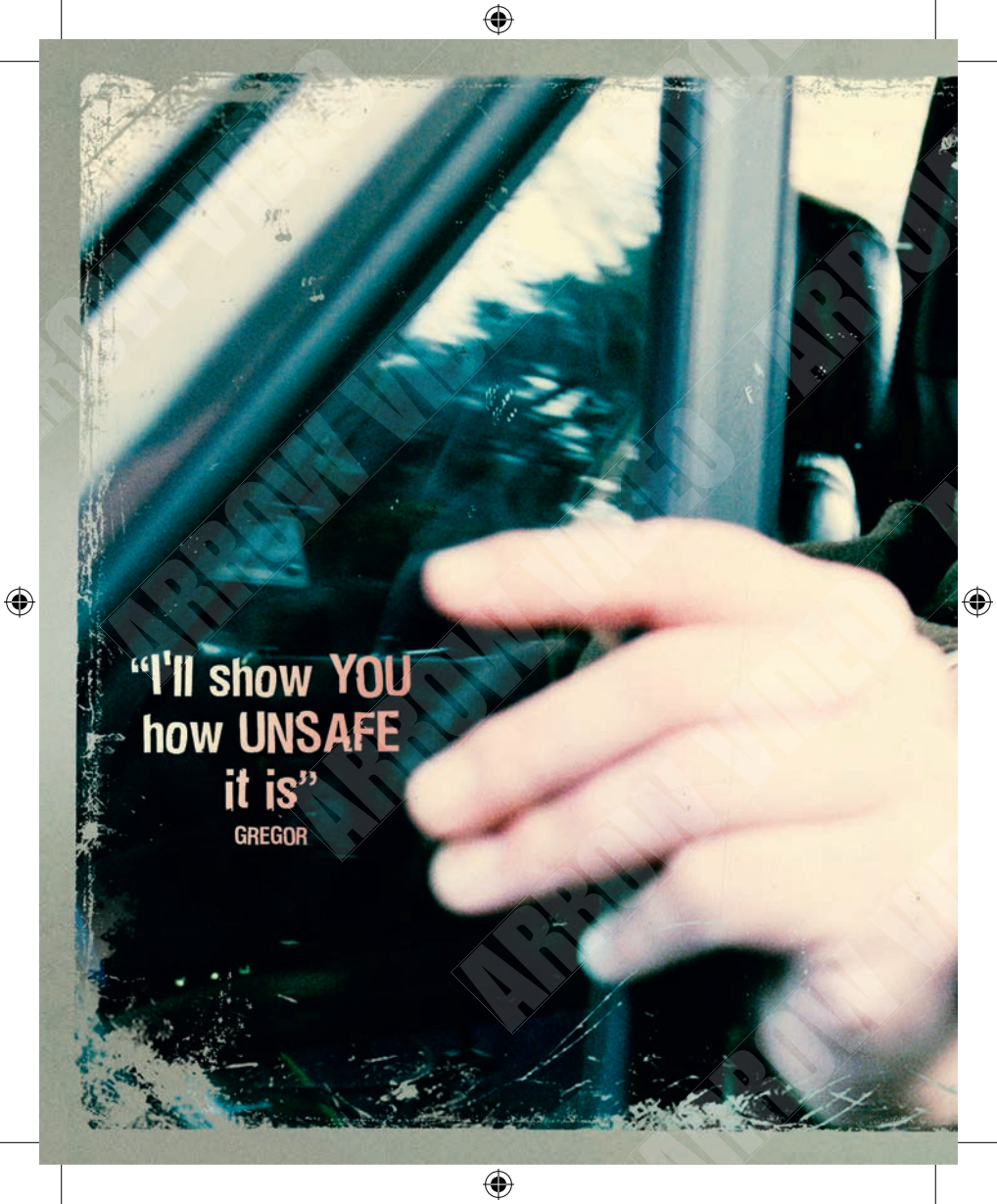
chases executed entirely practically – on location, in camera – and not augmented in any way by the CGI messes that would come to dominate in this department in only a few years. Again, at the time of release, *Ronin* might have seemed like an efficient vehicle, whereas now it looks like a classic car.

The story is an old-fashioned robbery caper tale in which the international cast lends a similarly cosmopolitan feel to the proceedings in general (again, if this had been made thirty years earlier, it would be one of those “jet-set” spy/espionage romps with a cast member from every continent). The cast gathers Yank De Niro (underplaying, but often still quite droll: “Of course I’m afraid. You think I’m reluctant because I’m happy?”), charismatic (Moroccan-born) Frenchman Jean Reno (in the dreadful American *Godzilla* the same year), sinister Swede Stellan Skarsgård (fresh from Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* [1996]), and Brits Natascha McElhone, Sean Bean (thankfully soon eliminated), and Jonathan Pryce. The caper concept of strangers brought together to pull off a job is practically a subgenre unto itself, from John Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *Ocean’s Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960) and *The Italian Job* (Peter Collinson, 1969) to Kubrick’s *The Killing* (1956) and



Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), although the straightforwardly somber *Ronin* couldn't be more different from the jokey post-modern irony of that landmark title earlier in the decade. Like so many of these films, the exact purpose of the robbery is rather immaterial - indeed, Frankenheimer is pretty brazen about the unimportant nature of the specifics. The contents of the case are never identified (you couldn't ask for a more obvious McGuffin), the story displays only a superficial interest in its IRA trappings, and we don't even learn who the all-knowing "man in the wheelchair" is, nor where his loyalties reside. Such casual treatment of narrative details could be potentially damaging for a less assured filmmaker, but for an old pro like Frankenheimer, it only displays an astute grasp of his film's true strengths.

Moving from a background directing early live television for classic shows like *Playhouse 90* into feature filmmaking with 1957's *The Young Stranger*, Frankenheimer was one of the most promising and fairly prolific young directors of the 1960s, responsible for two inarguable masterpieces (*The Manchurian Candidate* in 1962 and *Seconds* in 1966) and several other noteworthy productions: *Birdman of Alcatraz* (also 1962), *Seven Days in May* (1964), and the

A close-up photograph of a hand reaching out and touching a metal railing. The background is blurred, showing a person's face. The image has a grainy, high-contrast aesthetic with a blue and yellow color palette. A large, semi-transparent watermark reading 'ARROWHEAD' is oriented diagonally across the entire image. Four registration marks are visible at the corners of the image.

**"I'll show YOU
how UNSAFE
it is"**

GREGOR



pre-*Ronin* automotive showcase *Grand Prix* (1966). Yet his career in the decades that followed would prove to be frustratingly erratic. While there are undeniable highlights, both creatively – his masterful adaptation of *The Iceman Cometh* (1973) and his ultra-gritty neo-noir *52 Pick-Up* (1986) – and commercially (he had back-to-back hits with *French Connection II* in 1975 and the regrettably titled *Black Sunday* in 1977), there was also a certain carelessness to his choice of projects, a problem compounded by his bout with alcoholism. Frankenheimer has conceded that his heavy drinking created problems with the 1979 eco-horror guilty pleasure *Prophecy*, and on that film's follow-up, the 1982 Japan-lensed martial arts effort *The Challenge*, the director admitted it was the only time he was actually openly drinking and inebriated on set. By the late 80s and into the 90s, Frankenheimer alternated between rather forgettable, uninspired genre programmers for theatrical play, while doing his best work for cable television networks HBO and TNT. But two years prior to *Ronin*, Frankenheimer accepted a journeyman assignment gig that couldn't have been more doomed.



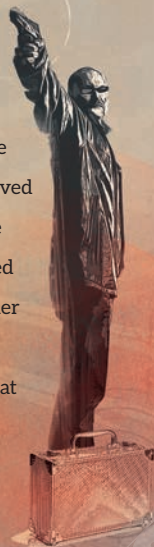




1996's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* had begun as a lavish dream project for eccentric South African genre auteur Richard Stanley, but when various factors conspired to make the production seem apparently cursed, Stanley was fired and Frankenheimer was brought in for the thankless task of attempting to clean up the mess and complete the shoot. With his trademark professionalism, Frankenheimer got the thing in the can, but that was about it. A commercial and critical bomb of whopping proportions, *Moreau* was most notable in Frankenheimer's oeuvre only for providing him with the opportunity to publicly lambaste the film's notoriously difficult star Val Kilmer, and while its failure was scarcely Frankenheimer's fault, one wonders whether he approached the subsequent *RONIN* with the perspective of both creative renewal, and the need to reprove himself.

The old-school style of *Ronin* (thankfully) couldn't be more different than its predecessor: the look of *Ronin* is lean, sleek, spare, almost minimalist. Cinematographer Robert Fraisse, whose career ranges from the 1975 softcore sex antics of *Story of O* and *Emmanuelle II* to the 2004 romance favorite *The Notebook*, utilized Deluxe's CCE process to heighten contrast and deepen blacks, while

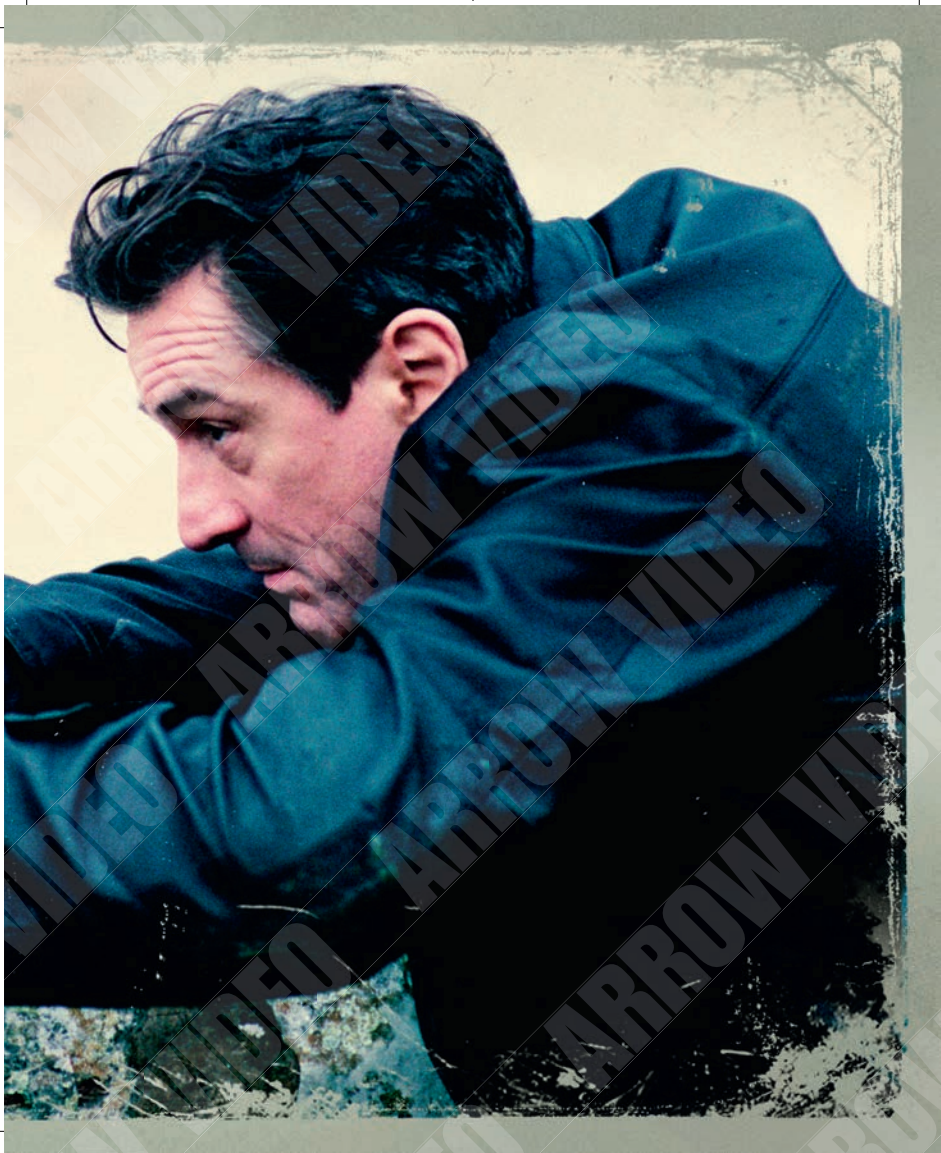
Frankenheimer has stripped the images of all primary colors, so that the film's cold palette plays as black-and-white as imaginable for a contemporary color film. Compositions make masterful use of the 2.35 ratio, camera movement is stylish but unobtrusive - there is none of the ridiculously contrived shaky-cam aesthetic of the thematically similar *Bourne* series (speaking of that franchise, *Ronin* also deals with the technology in its storyline in a purely utilitarian way, with none of the techno-fetishism employed by Paul Greengrass, etc.; admittedly *Ronin* unfolds in an era just prior to omnipresent smartphone and GPS use). Fraise frames the action with wide angle lenses and heavy depth of field. Frankenheimer claims to have filmed over 2200 separate shots for *RONIN*, but the final cut betrays any sense of excess. At one point, Frankenheimer was incorrectly rumored to have fathered Michael Bay (Frankenheimer was romantically involved with the adopted Bay's biological mother), but the styles of the two filmmakers couldn't be more different, the latter's cluttered and chaotic maximalism contrasting unfavorably with the elder filmmaker's linear simplicity. Have the aesthetics of American genre cinema gradually become so corrupted and degraded that



**“Either you're PART of the PROBLEM
or you're PART OF the SOLUTION
or you're just PART OF the LANDSCAPE”**

SAM





the simple approach of a classicist like Frankenheimer now seems almost radical in its purity? Apparently the answer is yes.

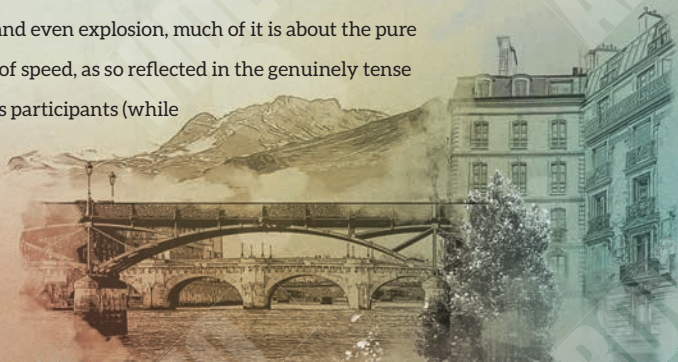
If the job of a good director is to know that there are only two places where one should place the camera, the job of a *great* director is to recognize that one of those places is wrong. There are several sequences in *Ronin* that demonstrate that Frankenheimer was often a great director. While his strengths were most famously evident whenever paranoia, conspiracy, and intrigue were front and center, he was also highly skilled at framing action, and the car chases of *Ronin* have become justifiably canonical. Near the midpoint of the film, there's an automotive pursuit through the streets of Nice that's compact, nimble, muscular, and quite retro in its overall tone (while there are no actual fruit carts destroyed in the process, the chase still comes very close to this cliché, with tables in a seafood market instead of produce) – though, sadly, the image of a vehicle careening onto the sidewalk and plowing through a group of cafe patrons in the south of France has a much more sobering connotation today than it did in the 90s. Interestingly, though, Frankenheimer's film does confront the grim inevitability of innocent bystanders





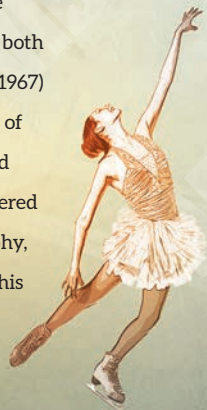


caught in the crossfire of the main characters' conflicts, and it handles it in the same blunt way it treats all of the violence in the film. Refreshingly for an American action film of the period, the violence in *Ronin* is never used for comic purposes, nor is it punishingly sadistic and prolonged either. It's merely quick, sharp, lethal. The film's major set piece is, of course, the seven-minute car chase through Paris, which remains a remarkable work of action filmmaking. If car chases in action movies serve the same show-stopping function as dance sequences in musicals, then the Parisian pursuit of *Ronin* is clearly Fred Astaire dancing on the ceiling in *Royal Wedding* (Stanley Donen, 1951) or Gene Kelly's title number in *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952). Essentially, the whole film has been leading up to this. Impressively unfolding without a music score for the first half, the seven-minute chase sequence is indeed striking, but also - like *Ronin* in general - surprisingly simple and streamlined. While there is the occasional collision and even explosion, much of it is about the pure intensity of speed, as so reflected in the genuinely tense faces of its participants (while



obviously not driving, the actors were nonetheless in cars actually going those speeds during the sequence). The film continues for its third act following the chase sequence, but this was clearly the *raison d'être*, and much of the remaining portion of the running time will find the audience trying to catch their breath.

In fact, *Ronin* ends much as it began - with a meeting in a chilly, rainy Paris café, this time during the day rather than the night, and with more trust (and more injuries) between the clandestine attendees. The atmospheric setting (a canny hybrid of actual location and studio set) evokes some of the classic Paris caper films of years past, a Gallic *noir* world of gray overcast skies, gray overcoats, rain-soaked alleyways illuminated by a single streetlight, and an endless flow of Gitanes. And the film's title calls to mind one of the most iconic French crime thrillers, as both *Ronin* and Jean-Pierre Melville's hitman classic *Le Samouraï* (1967) employ Japanese titles specifically referencing warrior codes of honor to which the films' (anti-)heroes aspire (or are burdened with). *Le Samouraï* is perhaps Melville's most fondly remembered film today, although its criminal companions in his filmography, from his maiden crime movie effort *Bob le flambeur* (1956) to his





swan songs *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970) and *Un flic* (1972), share more affinities with Frankenheimer's film. Frankenheimer lived in Paris for many years, so he clearly brings an experienced location eye to *Ronin*, and an adroit sense of Parisian locations is also a hallmark of Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), which also contains a friendship between hoods Jean Gabin and René Dary that is a forerunner to the climactic camaraderie shared by De Niro and Reno. The acknowledged godfather of Paris caper films is expatriate Jules Dassin's cult favorite *Rififi* (1955), though the heist in *Ronin* is executed with far less élan than the celebrated silent robbery in Dassin's movie. *Ronin*'s all-star team structure has French crime film precedents too, most famously Henri Verneuil's vaguely *Ocean's*-esque 1969 hit *The Sicilian Clan*, which reunited Verneuil with his stars Gabin and Alain Delon from an earlier robbery saga, *Any Number Can Win* (Henri Verneuil, 1963). Of course, there are innumerable other French crime films which are far more unlikely influences on the Frankenheimer work, from comic capers like Claude Lelouch's *L'aventure, c'est l'aventure* (1972) and Jacques Deray's *Borsalino* (1970), to grotty downmarket sleaze like exploitation kingpin Max Pécas' entertaining *Brigade des mœurs*

(1985), a film which feels like it could have actually been made by the denizens of the underworld it depicts.

Frankenheimer had one more theatrical release in him (and it was actually another robbery caper yarn, 2000's forgettable *Reindeer Games*), De Niro does occasionally return to heartfelt and committed serious roles, albeit largely in a supporting capacity these days, and one can sporadically come across the odd, adult-gearred, mature crime thriller, although rarely from the Hollywood studio system, and more reliably from Europe. Still, arriving at the dawn of a new millennium, *Ronin* felt uncannily like the twilight of a particular filmmaking era, a sunset for many of these qualities in the multiplex moviegoing environment of the day. If this is indeed regrettably true, at least *Ronin* finds them going out with a bang and not a whimper.

Travis Crawford is a film festival programmer, and a contributing writer to such publications as *Filmmaker*, *Film Comment*, and *The Calvert Journal*.

About the Restoration

Ronin has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films. The film is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered 4K Lasergraphics Director Scanner at Deluxe's EFilm facility in Burbank.

Picture grading and restoration was completed at Silver Salt restoration in London. Robert Fraisse, *Ronin's* Director of Photography, supervised and approved the grading.

The audio mixes were produced by MGM.

Restoration Supervised by James White/Arrow Films

Materials made available by Scott Grossman/MGM

EFilm/Deluxe Film Scanning services:

Sean Casey, David Morales, Larry McQuaide, Kevin Albert, Disa DeFrese

Restoration and grading services by Silver Salt Restoration:

Mark Bonnici, Stephen Bearman, Anthony Badger, Tom Walker, Lisa Copson

Special Thanks to Robert Fraisse for his assistance with this restoration.



Production Credits

Discs and Booklet Produced by Michael Mackenzie

Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Blu-ray mastering David Mackenzie

Cover Art and Design Oink Creative

Booklet Artist Chris Malbon

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