

Christian Bale's NEAT TRICK

The actor turned tough films into a career filled with 'Prestige,' 'Batman' — and now 'Harsh Times'

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

This is how it works in the new Hollywood: Smart young actors like Tobey Maguire and Matt Damon make well-received blockbusters like "Spider-Man" and "The Bourne Identity," and that box-office success powers their ability to make challenging movies that solidify their status as serious guys (see Damon in "The Departed" and Maguire in the upcoming "The Good German").

Christian Bale is following this game plan — though he wasn't afraid to get serious before he got a superhero. One of the few stars to jump from child actor (in Steven Spielberg's 1987 WWII drama "Empire of the Sun") to adult roles, the Welsh actor strutted and scared in "Vel-

vet Goldmine" (1998), "American Psycho" (2000), "Laurel Canyon" (2002) and "The Machinist" (2004). But last year's hit "Batman Begins" has taken him to a new level: "The Prestige," in which he and Hugh Jackman play dueling magicians, was tops at the box office when it opened a

few weeks back.

This Friday, he returns to tough stuff with "Harsh Times," writer-director David Ayer's action drama about an Iraqi war veteran who meets up with an old pal (Freddy Rodriguez) and pulls them both into shady deals, violence and despair.

For Bale, 32, the role is both another chance to show off his acting chops, and a return to risky business.

"Harsh Times" was a perfect antidote to working on movies for seven months," says Bale, speaking of labor-intensive flicks like "Batman Begins," "The Prestige" and the 2005 epic "The New World."

"Coming off of things like that, and then doing something like 'Harsh Times' in 24 days — and on top of it, doing it with someone like David Ayer, who [did] what everybody says you should never do, which is fund the movie."

"The movie came out of his own pocket," Bale continues. "He had the opportunity to go through studios. But he didn't like what they were telling him, the changes he'd have to make. So he remortgaged his house and stuck the money up. That's what I loved."

Bale's take on "Batman," oddly, seems to fall into that category of doing what he loves, precisely because his approach was very unstudio. After almost a decade of edgy, indie or out-there roles, Bale and director Christopher Nolan both knew the actor had what it took to re-energize the franchise.

"I didn't try to talk Chris Nolan into giving me that role," Bale says. "It was more like, 'Look, this is what I want to do, what do you think of that? Is it going to fit with your idea of the film?' ... And so, I

was able to make a movie in that case that I really like."

"So often with [bigger movies], details go out the window, and that's disappointing," Bale continues. "Why, when it has a higher budget, do [moviemakers] have to eradicate what makes stories so interesting? I love blowing stuff up as much as the next person. But after awhile, you just feel like you're watching somebody else play a video game."

True to form, Bale hasn't followed his commercial breakthrough simply with more blockbusters. While "The Prestige" had director Nolan, "X-Men's" Hugh Jackman and starlet Scarlett Johansson attached, and he's about to go behind the famous mask again for the Bat-sequel "The Dark Knight" (co-starring Heath Ledger as the Joker), doing "Harsh Times" and director Werner Herzog's upcoming war film "Rescue Dawn" are projects Bale says he's been eyeing for years.

As Ayer, who earned his bones as the screenwriter of the Oscar-winning "Training Day," put it, "Christian actually picks roles. He's not chasing business situations — he's chasing material."

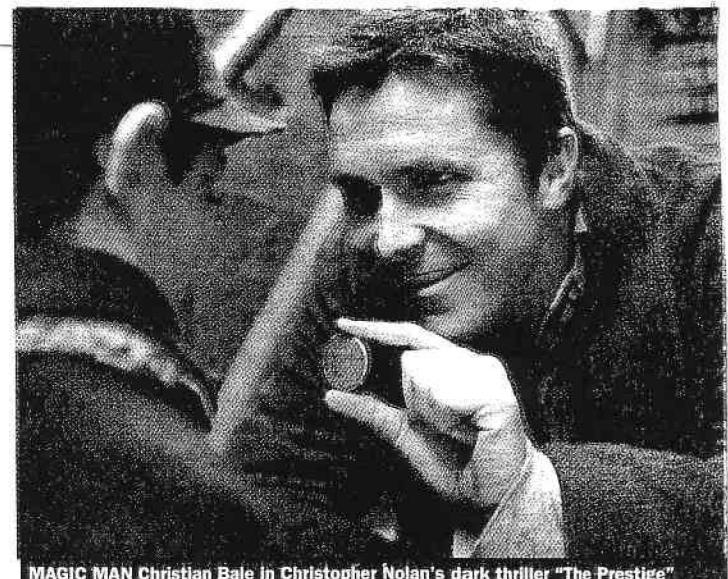
A few of the projects Bale will chase include a remake of the 1957 Western "3:10 to Yuma," and the musical drama "I'm Not There," which will co-star Cate Blanchett, Richard Gere, Michelle Williams and Julianne Moore. And while the latter film will utilize the music of Bob Dylan, and Bale plays a folkie who finds God, he asserts it's not a biopic. Nonetheless, it's the first time Bale will sing on-screen since the 1992 Disney musical "Newsies," an early part he good-naturedly mocks before admitting that he'll "try anything once."

Which may explain his eagerness to work with the notoriously adventurous German director Herzog ("Fitzcarraldo," "Grizzly Man"). The actor says "Rescue Dawn" was exactly the outrageous experience he was hoping for.

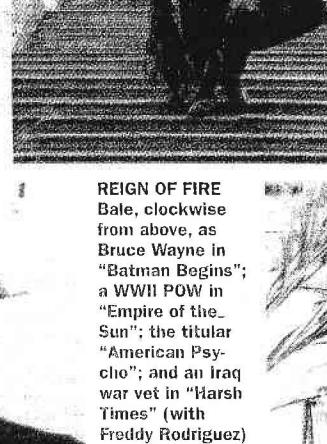
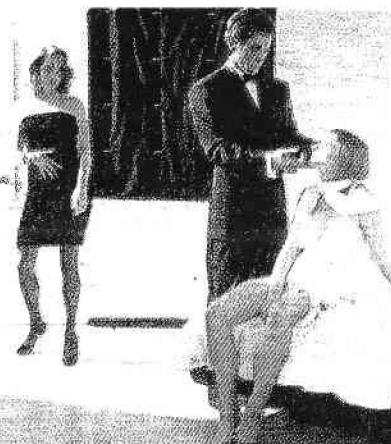
"That wasn't a standard film shoot," laughs Bale. "We were in a jungle in Thailand, and would find ourselves many mornings with half the movie's crew gone. So everybody took on different jobs to get by for a few days. Half the bloody crew walked out, and we just kept going!"

"But there were toenails being extracted and people being washed down rapids half-drowning, and at one point I had to pick up live snakes in the middle of a river."

"You know, it didn't disappoint."



MAGIC MAN Christian Bale in Christopher Nolan's dark thriller "The Prestige"



REIGN OF FIRE
Bale, clockwise from above, as Bruce Wayne in "Batman Begins"; a WWII POW in "Empire of the Sun"; the titular "American Psycho"; and an Iraq war vet in "Harsh Times" (with Freddy Rodriguez)