



GOLIN-GLOBUS presented by
JOHN FRANKENHEIMER

52 PICK-UP

The Cannon Group, Inc. Presents

Roy Scheider
Ann-Margret

in a **Golan-Globus Production**
of a **John Frankenheimer** film

52

PICK-UP

also starring **Vanity**

John Glover
Robert Trebor
Lonny Chapman
Kelly Preston
Doug McClure

and **Clarence Williams III** as Bobby Shy

Music Composed and Performed by
Garry Chang

Film Editor
Robert F. Shugrue

Photography by
Jost Vacano

Executive Producer
Henry T. Weinstein

Based on the Novel by
Elmore Leonard

Screenplay by
Elmore Leonard
and **John Stepling**

Produced by
Menahe Golan
and **Yoram Globus**

Directed by
John Frankenheimer



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by the Badlands Collective

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52 PICK-UP

A FILM BY FRANKENHEIMER, LEONARD AND CANNON

by the Badlands Collective

While the empire of Cannon Films was largely defined by low-rent ninja movies, Chuck Norris action spectacles and opportunistic sequels, moguls Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus certainly backed a lot of great directors. Cannon funded John Cassavetes' late masterpiece *Love Streams* in 1984, they scored an unexpected hit with Andrei Konchalovsky's *Runaway Train* (1985), and they gave Jean-Luc Godard \$1 million to make a star-studded adaptation of *King Lear* (1987). (Godard spent much of that money on Concorde flights, an ill-advised attempt to cast Richard Nixon, and the brief participation of Norman Mailer, but it's the thought that counts.)

In the case of *52 Pick-Up* (1986), Golan and Globus had good reason not to want to make the picture, had it not been for the opportunity to work with a filmmaker whose reputation could add a touch of a class to the Cannon stable. John Frankenheimer was, by the mid-1980s, suffering a string of flops, but retained a name for having crafted respected and successful thrillers like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *French Connection II* (1975) and *Black Sunday* (1977). Frankenheimer had picked up Elmore Leonard's 1974 novel *52 Pick-Up* at an airport to read during a flight to London, and by the time he landed he knew he wanted to make a movie. The problem: the rights to the novel were held by Cannon, and they had already exercised those rights by releasing an adaptation called *The Ambassador* in 1984.

"[*The Ambassador*] actually had little to do with *52 Pick-Up*," Frankenheimer later recalled. "It was Rock Hudson's last screen appearance. I knew that no-one was even going to remember that movie." Andrew Yule, in his book *Hollywood a Go-Go: The True Story of the Cannon Film Empire* (1987), was even more dismissive of this adaptation: "The bones of Elmore Leonard's *52 Pick-Up* had been dug up, laid bare and shipped to Israel. J. Lee Thompson's lumpy non-direction and Max Jack's dreadful script provide the *coup de grâce* as they concoct a hideous slaughter-of-the-innocents finale that sits uneasily with the tacky B-film preceding it."

Leonard's novel had been a tale of blackmail that twists itself into a complex narrative of



psychological gamesmanship, dishonour amongst thieves and the bonds of marriage. His protagonist, Harry Mitchell, was a self-made American industrialist who had committed adultery, been bribed by his girlfriend's kidnappers and found himself forced to turn the tables on the aggressors after his own refusal to co-operate drew himself and his wife further into their world of violence. In *The Ambassador*, however, Robert Mitchum played a maverick American diplomat holding casual beer meetings in the desert and trying to convince Israelis and Arabs to just get along. While both stories contain scenes of their heroes being shown home movies by blackmailers who want to demonstrate their seriousness, in this version it is Mitchum's wife (Ellen Burstyn) who is having an affair, with a PLO member no less. The guilt and personal danger of Harry's story was transformed into a naïve yet crudely violent star vehicle about a diligent peacemaker trying to save his family and country from embarrassment, so he can continue shepherding his flock.

Frankenheimer wanted to make a film that stayed true to the plot, characters and dialogue that so enthralled him on that flight to London. His determination to start afresh with a new adaptation secured backing from Cannon to the tune of \$8 million, but the process had a false start when producer Henry Weinstein suggested a young playwright named John Stepping to write the screenplay. Stepping's first draft deviated too far from the novel, so Frankenheimer decided to go back to the source, asking Leonard to get involved in the writing process, along with Roy Scheider, who had signed on to star.

This was by no means a sure thing. Leonard loved movies, but had grown disenchanted with the movie business. His work (particularly his Westerns) had been adapted with mixed results over the previous two decades, but he had recently suffered the double blow of his own screenplay for *52 Pick-Up* being transformed into something unrecognisable in *The Ambassador* and then seeing Burt Reynolds' *Stick* (1985) suffer through studio interference. "It's very, very theatrical," Leonard complained after watching *Stick*. "I do everything in my power to make my writing not look like writing, and when it appears on screen you see these actors acting all over the place." Leonard must have been particularly wary of getting involved in another *52 Pick-Up* adaptation because this book holds a special place in his oeuvre. It was the first of his novels to be set in Detroit, the city that he would subsequently make his own, with a third of his books taking place there. And by the mid-80s, Leonard was writing his greatest run of novels, which would include *Glitz* (1985), *Freaky Deaky* (1988) and *Get Shorty* (1990), none of which would skirt the same dark recesses as *52 Pick-Up*.

Nevertheless, Leonard did agree to be involved, and the adaptation that he, Frankenheimer and Scheider cooked up between them sticks closely to the template of the novel. Much of the dialogue, unsurprisingly, is verbatim, and until the end of the film (which changes the

final revenge from a complex suitcase bombing to a car-engine ambush), the plot beats mostly as Leonard originally intended, albeit with some intriguing alterations. The film shifts the action from Detroit to Los Angeles, largely as a cost-cutting exercise, though Frankenheimer and cinematographer Jost Vacano ensure the glamour and bright sunshine often associated with L.A. are conspicuously absent. *52 Pick-Up* takes place largely in Harry's factory, in dingy bars and in porno theatres, and the relocation to a stone's throw from Hollywood creates a sensation of exploring the seedy underbelly of the movie business. Some changes to the book in the process of adaptation were probably cut for streamlining, such as the subplot about Harry's antagonistic relationship with union rep Koliba (ironically, as it was union concerns that primarily vetoed the idea of shooting in Detroit). One of the most striking aspects of Leonard's book is the way he explores the emotional rupture Harry's infidelity causes in his and his wife Barbara's 23-year marriage, and how the shared trauma of the blackmail plot forces them to re-evaluate their relationship and ultimately draws them even closer. Frankenheimer's film – with a canny, knowing performance by Ann-Margret – sacrifices the novel's chapter in which Barbara briefly contemplates having an affair of her own, but does up the stakes in its own way by making Barbara a candidate for city council, and Harry's scandal endangering her aspirations.

Frankenheimer said that he set out to make a straightforward dramatisation of the novel, but the intensity of his choices revitalise it, vindicating his decision to bring it to the screen. When Harry is shown the video of his girlfriend Cini's murder, and realises that he has been framed for the crime, the scene plays out at agonising length, Harry's face illuminated by a torchlight and the glib commentary provided by Alan Raimy (John Glover) making the girl's suffering feel even more sadistic and cruel. ("I'm still proud of my lighting in this.") When the villains leave Harry to contemplate his situation, he looks down and sees blood at his feet, realising to his horror that he is sitting in the exact spot in which Cini met her death. The immediacy of the horror is bracing and Frankenheimer then cuts to Harry in his car, the lights and noise of a traffic accident up ahead mirroring his frenzied emotional state. The director had wanted a passing train to create this effect instead, but Cannon balked at the estimated price. Nevertheless, this recreation of a sequence that was already powerful in the book manages to make it work in a vividly cinematic way. While Harry, in the book, goes through internal denial as to whether Cini was actually murdered, the surprise of the murder in the film makes the audience work through the same question for itself. And the minor change of the snuff films being shot on 16mm film in the book, and VHS tape in the movie, makes for both a more plausible contemporary update and a scuzzier, crasser textural detail.

Frankenheimer was coming off a bad couple of years when he made *52 Pick-Up*, with flops such as *Prophecy* (1979) and *The Holcroft Covenant* (1985), and a long-running battle with



alcoholism that landed him in rehab in the early 1980s. Although he has admitted that he had some misgivings about working with Cannon, their reputation for thriftiness preceding them, it seems working in this environment actually brought the best out of him. After all, Frankenheimer was a TV veteran, where tight budgets and fast schedules were the norm, and the energy and focus that he could bring to *52 Pick-Up* is evident throughout the film. “I like the whole Cannon experience,” he said to *The Hollywood Reporter* at the time. “They make decisions through their love of movies, love to be in on the give-and-take. As long as you’re financially responsible, they’re terrific to directors.”

If Cannon were known for exploitation and cashing in on action trends, Frankenheimer saw himself as doing the opposite in his collaboration with them. He called the project “the opposite of *Rambo*,” because “although it’s an action story, we’re trying to tell a very intimate story of a man and a woman in jeopardy.” This take is borne out by the specificity of the performances, particularly the three actors playing the blackmailers, whose work more than anything distinguishes the film from the ranks of the trashy thrillers it is sometimes bracketed with. Glover’s simultaneously slick and sleazy Raimy is a self-satisfiedly menacing creation, his theatrical delivery bringing a strange and vital edge to the most potentially mundane scenes, while Robert Trebor’s Leo Franks is a study in sweaty desperation, and Clarence Williams III, as the laconic hitman Bobby Shy, is a grim, unpredictable presence whose minimal dialogue murmurs above a simmering mix of quiet deliberation and ruthlessness. The contrast between these three very distinct characters and the shifting dynamic between them as Harry turns the tables is fascinating to observe, their bravado shifting to fear, insecurity and cowardice.

Why aren’t these performances better remembered? Partly because *52 Pick-Up* didn’t find much of an audience upon its release, a fact that Frankenheimer put down to Cannon’s failure to market it effectively. “You have to win the battle twice,” the director later said. “You’ve got to get the picture made, and then you’ve got to get the studio behind it to promote it.” While Frankenheimer had enjoyed working with Golan on the production of the film, he clashed frequently with Globus over its distribution and publicity. The Cannon coffers, never overflowing, were running dry at this point after a number of costly pictures and box-office flops (such as 1987’s Golan-directed *Over the Top*, for which Sylvester Stallone had reportedly been paid \$12 million). Smaller quality films like *52 Pick-Up* were allowed to slip through the cracks. In the US, after disappointing opening weekend returns, Cannon attempted to stop the bleeding by running a double-page ad in *Variety* with positive quotes from *Newsweek*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The New York Times* and many others. “The Best Film Of The Season From Cannon,” this ad boasted of *52 Pick-Up*, although Yule wryly notes that perhaps it should have said “The Best Film Of The Season – And It’s From Cannon”; the actual wording makes it sound like the best of a bad bunch. In the UK, it was slated for

release in June 1987. Promoted with a free screening for *Time Out* readers, there was then a haphazard week by week delay, including a one-off screening at *Screen on the Green* (on a double-bill with *The Hitcher*), and the film was eventually released later in the season, to mixed reviews from British critics. Frankenheimer had been developing *Endurance*, an auto-racing love story to follow up his 1966 hit *Grand Prix*, with Cannon – but inevitably, after the lacklustre performance of *52 Pick-Up*, the failure of Cannon’s *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987) and the eventual collapse of the company, this did not happen.

Even in the following decade, when Leonard became the toast of Hollywood with *Get Shorty* (1995), *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Out of Sight* (1998) – films that defined the ‘Elmore Leonard Film’ as something slick, hip and witty – the dark and gripping *52 Pick-Up* remained an obscure gem in dire need of rediscovery. “It’s a very good movie and it could have been a hit, should have been a hit,” Frankenheimer said. “People who see this picture on video say, ‘My God, what a fascinating movie!’ They didn’t even know it had been in cinemas.” A year to the month after *52 Pick-Up* sank, another, more populist dark vision of the consequences of infidelity, *Fatal Attraction*, would dominate the American box office with eight straight weeks at number one.

Given all that, it’s tempting to frame *52 Pick-Up* as the nihilistic flipside to the more iconic Leonard adaptations. While the picture does retain the author’s quintessential stylistic traits – the perfectly honed lingua franca of American criminality and the irrepressible verbal rattle – they are filtered through a bleaker, more hopeless vision of society. Indeed, there is a sense of foreboding in *52 Pick-Up* that skews closer to more brooding New Hollywood thrillers than it does to the later, better-known adaptations of the writer’s work. The material may be typical Leonard territory, but the execution betrays its own extreme degree of weariness. With Barbara’s run for office serving as one of the foundations of the narrative, a sense of civic anxiety is inherent from the beginning, but, as the blackmail motif unfolds, an atmosphere of dread starts to engulf the picture, positioning it in the realm of classic noir.

Noir may have begun in the corrosive pulp fiction of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, but its image as a definable aesthetic was consummated by the great crime films of the 1940s. With their careworn cynicism and moody *mise-en-scène*, films like Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* (1946) and Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* (1948) traded on a sense of post-war malaise that was prevalent in the American society of the decade. *52 Pick-Up* repurposed that uneasiness for the 1980s, a decade defined by greed. One of the central plot points – a demand not only for a lump sum, but for an annuity to be paid by Harry for the rest of his life – elevates the crime to the state of existential burden, not only in keeping with the noir ethos, but ascribing a degree of nihilistic criminality to the proceedings that’s worthy of Dostoyevsky. If this action-packed tale of vengeance



ultimately also reminds us of *Death Wish* (1974), well, these are the kinds of contradictions that Cannon, pulling in all directions between trash and art, found itself incorporating.

The Badlands Collective is a group of film curators based in London, screening special events of overlooked films. They showed 52 Pick-Up as part of their 35mm Cannon Films season in 2015. www.badlands-collective.com

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

52 Pick-Up is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 2.0 stereo sound. The HD master was provided by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

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