

# ***HIRED TO KILL***





## ***CAST***

**BRIAN THOMPSON** as Ryan

**OLIVER REED** as Bartos

**GEORGE KENNEDY** as Thomas

**JOSE FERRER** as Rallis

**MICHELLE MOFFETT** as Ana

**BARBARA LEE ALEXANDER** as Sheila

**JORDANA CAPRA** as Joanna

**KENDALL CONRAD** as Daphne

**KIM LONSDALE** as Sivi

**JUDE MUSSETTER** as Dahlia

**PENELOPE REED** as Katrina

**DAVID SAWYER** as Louis

**ANGELA GEREKOU** as Tara

## ***CREW***

Directed by **NICO MASTORAKIS** and **PETER RADER**

Produced by **NICO MASTORAKIS**

Screenplay by **NICO MASTORAKIS**

and **FRED C. PERRY & KIRK ELLIS**

Director of Photography **ANDREAS BELLIS**

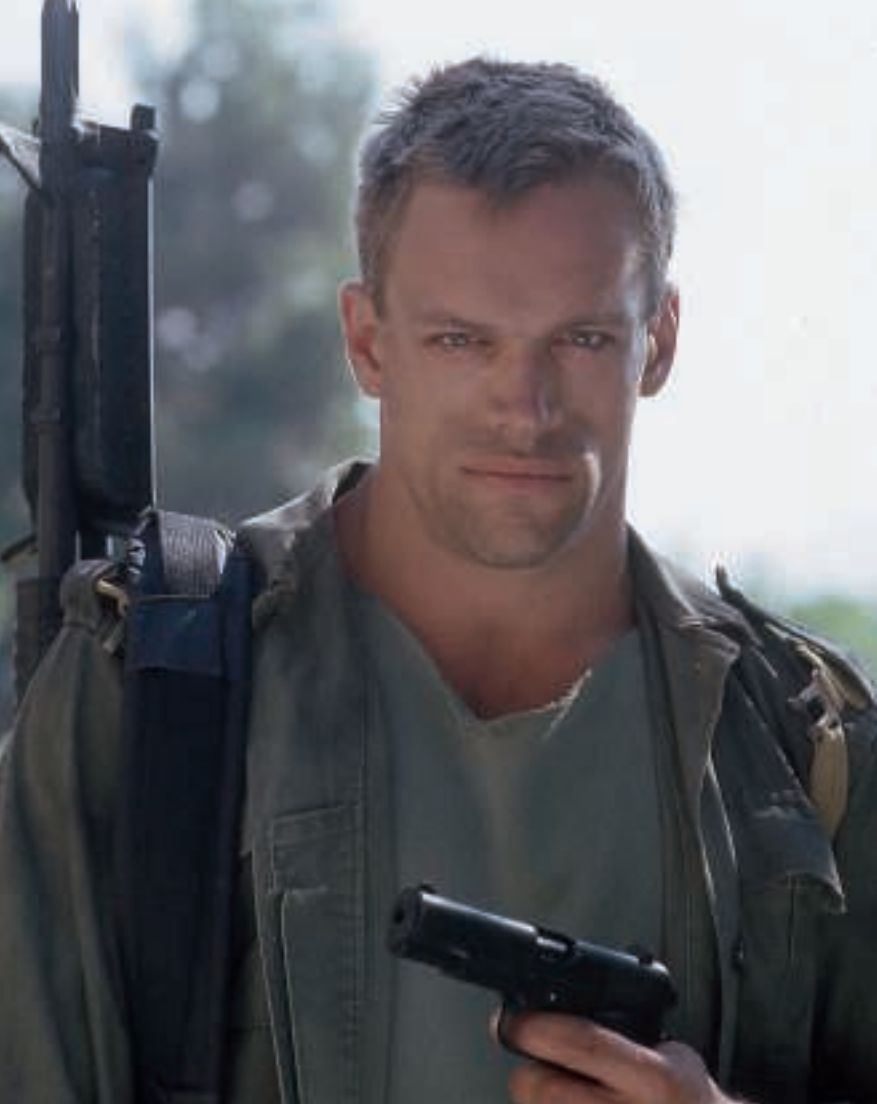
Edited by **BARRY ZETLIN**

Music by **JERRY GRANT**



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# MERCENARY TACTICS

**THE DIRTY DEEDS AND MISCHIEF MAKING OF HIRED TO KILL**

by James Oliver

There are many ways of measuring how cultural attitudes have changed over the years, but the changing depiction of mercenaries in movies can hardly be claimed as one of the most revealing. Nevertheless, it does give an interesting indication of shifting perspectives.

Time was, mercenaries – those fellows who sell their (usually violent) services to the highest bidder irrespective of morality – were reprehensible figures in movies. In the classic Westerns, hired guns and bounty-hunters – mercenaries in Stetsons – were always contrasted unfavourably with the sheriffs and cowboys who only drew their weapons to uphold justice.

Like so much else, that changed in the 1960s, firstly in Spaghetti Westerns like *For a Few Dollars More* (Sergio Leone, 1965) and *The Mercenary* (aka *A Professional Gun*, Sergio Corbucci, 1968), and then in more mainstream fare such as *Dark of the Sun* (aka *The Mercenaries*, 1968) and *The Dogs of War* (John Irvin, 1980). The hired gun was now centre stage.

All this suggests audiences were becoming more comfortable with cynicism and even embracing it. Why? Reasons might include the loss of faith in traditional forms of authority occasioned by the war in Vietnam, Watergate and all that jazz or an increasingly prevalent materialism and commodification which created some sort of moral logic for mercenary acts. Or maybe audiences just thought they were cool.

Whatever the reason, all of the above was the warm up for *Hired to Kill*, originally released in 1990 and one of the most uncompromising of mercenary movies.

Looking at *Hired to Kill* it's tempting to suggest that the characters in the film



weren't the only mercenaries. One doesn't have to be as cynical as our anti-hero Frank Ryan to conclude that it wasn't the rich, nuanced script that attracted such distinguished, if temporarily under-employed, actors as Oliver Reed, George Kennedy and José Ferrer to participate. This was not, after all, a prestige project where the human condition would be considered and an actor might hone his craft. Nope, this was an exploitation film, where familiar ingredients were re-combined and re-heated to form something tasty, if not exactly nutritious; cinematic junk food, and none the worse for it.

So it is that *Hired to Kill* makes conscious nods to earlier mercenary movies; if the producers knew that most of their profits were destined to come from video rental stores around the world – and this was the era when VHS had supplanted the drive-ins as the home of exploitation flicks – it made sense to evoke memories of other, well-liked films to hook the potential viewer.

Much of the plot for *Hired to Kill* is plundered from that magnificent romp *The Wild Geese* (Andrew V. McLaglen, 1978), in which Richard Burton, Roger Moore and Richard Harris play soldiers of fortune hired by a wealthy businessman to free an inspirational resistance leader, so that he might topple a dictatorial regime that's become unfriendly to his business interests. And, just as in *Hired to Kill*, this businessman later sells them out when they no longer serve his purpose.

The film's twist, though, is to replace past-their-prime British thespians with nubile young women. This wasn't a complete novelty – after all, women have been kicking ass in action films at least since Pam Grier in the '70s, and it was made at the same time that martial arts queen Cynthia Rothrock was hitting her stride (and, of course, her co-stars) – but it adds a whole new spin to the whole guys-on-a-mission sub-genre; a prototype, perhaps, for the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, the (mainly) female killing crew in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films (2003/2004).

Having established this girl squad, it's a shame that the film doesn't do more with them; any putative feminist credentials are undermined by the frequent swimsuit scenes and cheesecake posing. Moreover, the characterisation is

limited, to say the least, with most of the actresses given little to do beyond running around in the background and occasionally looking glamorous (which, to be fair, they do very well).

Of course, one shouldn't be surprised that an exploitation film is uninterested in expanding the opportunities available for female characters, but it's disappointing that *Hired to Kill* forfeits the chance because elsewhere there is much more going on here than one would typically expect from a low-budget guns 'n' girls flick. There is a distinct – and distinctly mischievous – sensibility evident throughout the film, one which we might reasonably ascribe to its director.

Or at least, to one of the directors. While co-director Peter Rader would no doubt point to his credit on the opening titles, explain why he was awarded it and remonstrate with those who try to diminish his role, there can be absolutely no doubt that the film owes rather more, in its conception and its execution, to his senior colleague, Nico Mastorakis. Anyone who has seen one of the films for which Mastorakis has sole directorial credit – his action/slasher mash-up *The Zero Boys* (1986) perhaps, or maybe his notorious nasty *Island of Death* (1976) (both available on Arrow Video, both thoroughly recommended) – will recognise a family resemblance to *Hired to Kill*.

From his start with *Island of Death*, Mastorakis has always been unafraid to go just that little bit further than other directors. *Hired to Kill* is less obviously provocative than its elder sibling but it still shows a director untroubled either by good taste or restraint. Look at the plot mechanics: there can be precious few filmmakers who would have his character infiltrate his way into a paranoid police state by pretending to be a homosexual fashion designer.

Having established the ruse, Mastorakis goes further and builds scenes around it: the film's most memorable moment is the long, lingering kiss between lead mercenary Frank Ryan (played by Brian Thompson) and the main bad guy Michael Bartos (Oliver Reed), one of the few – the very, very few – same-sex smooches in the entire corpus of action cinema. This is not the first time Mastorakis had made mention of homosexuality in his films; there's a gay character in *Island of Death*, albeit one whose over-the-top, stereotypically camp behaviour can seem



more offensive to modern viewers than the violence and sundry depravity found elsewhere in that movie.

*Hired to Kill* shows a rather greater sensitivity to the subject. It's stretching things – perhaps to breaking point – to describe it as being 'progressive' in any way; after all, there are disparaging slurs and a general sense that it is somehow amusing for a character as rugged as Frank Ryan to have to pretend to be gay.

And yet, the film is more relaxed about homosexuality than many films of this era. Certainly, aside from some over-vigorous clapping at a fashion show, Thompson doesn't especially camp it up when he's playing Ryan's gay alter-ego, 'Cecil Thornton' (although this might be a consequence of Thompson's limitations as an actor). And in comparison to the ways its ostensible model *The Wild Geese* treats its gay character, *Hired to Kill* is very nearly a model of tolerance and understanding.

(If you're so minded, by the way, the whole homosexuality angle in *Hired to Kill* can be regarded as a commentary on the scarcely-buried homoeroticism of action cinema in the 1980s, the Schwarzenegger/Stallone movies with their ostentatious masculinity and absurd pneumatic physiques, frequently highlighted with sweat or oils, which the camera lingers over as lasciviously as Russ Meyer did his starlets. Such sequences can be considered far more homoerotic than Thompson's awkward lip-lock with Reed.)

Mastorakis always enjoyed playing with his audiences and the biggest challenge he gives them in *Hired to Kill* is the main character. Ryan begins the film, as is customary with the leading men in mercenary movies, as a complete bastard. Quite apart from his homophobia and misogyny ("nothing is perfect when women are involved"), he's a venal money-grubber who cares rather more for cold, hard cash than for any kind of principal.

The interesting thing is that he ends the film in much the same way. Whereas most mercenary movies find ways to temper their characters by revealing trace elements of conscience (in *The Wild Geese*, for instance, Burton's amoral Colonel Faulkner is redeemed by his loyalty to his comrades), Ryan remains a

bastard, quite happy to fulfil his mission by assassinating Rallis ("The Brother") and dissuaded only by the loaded gun which Ana points at his head; like the audience, she had come to believe that Ryan might be at least vaguely supportive of her cause. Nope – he really doesn't care.

It's utterly characteristic of Mastorakis that he would make his mercenary main character actually behave like a mercenary rather than softening him to make him more palatable to an audience accustomed to heroes. If Ryan is the closest thing to a good guy on screen (a role he assumes by default), it's only because everyone else – Bartos the *generalissimo*, Thomas the businessman – is much worse.

Mastorakis even gives Ryan an opportunity to articulate a surprisingly coherent critique of Ana's idealism, coldly predicting that the rebellion will not lead to a promised land of decency and democracy but the rebels will fall out, fight and kill each other for money and power. We do not linger to find out if he is correct but we are given absolutely no sign that his views have moderated in any way. It's a bleak forecast, albeit with a regrettably long list of precedents in real life, suggesting a rather greater understanding of revolution and tyranny than those traditionally found in films about potential regime change. It is, like many such films, set in a fictional country: Cypra.

While most movies about coups and counter-coups are set in fictitious African or Latin American countries, Cypra seems to be on the Mediterranean. Its name seems to suggest it's standing in for Cyprus, the island partitioned in 1974 after a brief stand-off when Greece and Turkey each asserted their influence. There are hints, though, that the film intends Cypra to be a stand-in for somewhere else.

Obviously, since the emphasis is (very properly) on action over authenticity, the country's political history is kept obscure but the briefing Ryan receives at the start describes a country that's been subject both to American interference and a military coup. That sounds not unlike the situation in Mastorakis' native Greece between 1967 and 1974. Thomas even identifies the rulers of 'Cypra' as "the Colonels", which was how the rulers of the Greek junta were known.



(If 'Cypra' is a body double for Greece then this would make *Hired to Kill* a companion of sorts to *Z* [1969], the film directed by Mastorakis' countryman Costa-Gavras, which concerns the first stirrings of a military coup in an unnamed country that's an obvious substitute for Greece. It would, however, make for an awkward double bill: *Z* is a downbeat procedural – a rather less rumbustious affair than Mastorakis' opus.)

Perhaps discussing the geo-political significance of a film that opens with its leading man silencing his telephone by shooting it is taking things just a bit too seriously. This isn't a sin that *Hired to Kill* can be found guilty of: although Mastorakis' films were certainly smarter than those of his rivals for shelf-space in video stores, they were successful – and they endure – because of his understanding of the dynamics of action filmmaking.

Mastorakis had, by this stage in his career, become an extremely proficient filmmaker, deploying his resources tactically and keeping his foot on the gas. In other words, he knew how to satisfy an audience who just wanted a dumb action movie. But even if *Hired to Kill* was inspired more by financial gain than any artistic imperative, that doesn't preclude it from being extremely entertaining. That's the thing about mercenaries, though: no matter what their motives, they know how to get the job done.

*James Oliver is a writer, film historian and filmmaker. He likes films about pirates.*





## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Hired to Kill* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with stereo 2.0 and 5.1 sound. All restoration work was completed by Deluxe Restoration, London and was approved by director Nico Mastorakis.

A 35mm interpositive element was scanned in 4K resolution on a 4K Spirit Datacine and was graded on the Baselight grading system. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of automated and manual restoration tools. The soundtracks were sourced and conformed from the director's original tape masters.

Restoration services by Deluxe Restoration, London

Film Scanning: Paul Doogan

Baselight colour grading: Stephen Bearman

Restoration Department Supervisors: Clayton Baker, Tom Barrett

Restoration Technicians: Debi Bataller, Dave Burt, Lisa Copson, Tom Wiltshire

Audio Conform: Tom Barrett

Restoration Department Management: Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones

Special Thanks to Nico Mastorakis



# ***PRODUCTION CREDITS***

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC Manager: **Nora Mehenni**

Subtitling: **dayforntight\***

Authoring: **Digital Cinema United**

Artist: **Graham Humphreys**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

# ***SPECIAL THANKS***

Alex Agran, Michael Felsher, Nico Mastorakis, Brian Thompson and Barry Zetlin.



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