So much more goes into filming a death scene than an actor holding his breath

Justin Theroux, as Tom and Emily Blunt as Rachel in "The Girl on the Train." (Barry Wetcher)

By **Randee Dawn**

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Here is what "The Girl on the Train" director Tate Taylor has learned about characters dying on screen: You can never have enough blood.

"It's funny about blood in movies," he says, noting that the two key deaths in "Train" are the first time he's killed anyone on film. "Whenever you think it's too much, whatever you show is about 20% of what the reality would be, with an actual injury. Even in movies where you think it's too bloody, it's not even accurate."

Death: Directors have to orchestrate it; actors have to make it look realistic and original. It's hard to come across a movie in Oscar season that doesn't in some fashion revolve around a death — and many this season are bathed in blood one way or another.

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"Death is interesting in cinema," says "Hell or High Water" director David Mackenzie. "Back in the day with westerns and war films, death was everywhere. Coming out of the Second World War, I'm sure the relationship between audiences and death was more connected. Nowadays cinema has moved to younger audiences and there's a lot of death denial in movies."

But to keep things interesting when characters die, actors and directors have to keep it surprising, emotionally resonant and real — all at the same time. So how do they do it?

Collaboration helps. "With a good director, it's a back-and-forth with the actor," says "Hacksaw Ridge" screenwriter Robert Schenkkan (a onetime actor whose spectacular death on "Star Trek: The Next Generation" was banned on British TV). "Some directors are autocratic — they see it in a certain way, and that's not so much fun."

And in the process of that collaboration, some directors really get into it. "Nocturnal Animals" director Tom Ford loves to personally demonstrate blocking, for example. "Generally when the actors come on set, I'll act it out for them," he says. "Throw myself on the ground and sometimes they say, 'Oh no, I shouldn't do that — I should do this.'"

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— Mike Birbiglia

There are a lot of technical aspects to consider as well beyond the basic blocking. "Don't Think Twice" may be a comedy, but it features a death scene and director Mike Birbiglia says there was a lot of detail to consider. "We had to make sure the actor's [chest] wasn't going up and down and his eyes weren't fluttering; we had to watch it closely on the monitor. In post they can sometimes digitize that stuff out — but you can't rely on that."

Tempo matters too. Taylor directed two major deaths in "Train" and was conscious about not making them both equally heinous. "I really had to decide my moment," he says. "After Megan is killed in such a horrific way, I realized that keeping on with horrific violence would take away from Anna's final action. So I decided we had to use strangulation first."

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Yet a death scene doesn't mean much if it's randomized or has no real context. "Hacksaw" features an extended battle sequence to rival "Saving Private Ryan" for sheer verisimilitude, but mass deaths can become a blur without an emotional undercurrent.

"Smitty's death isn't elaborated on," notes Schenkkan of the soldier character who befriends the film's protagonist played by Andrew Garfield. "These two men become possibly the only true friend either of them has had, and then one dies. It's quick and brutal like most of the deaths in 'Hacksaw,' but it's not the death that makes it potent — it's the buildup created before it."

The necessity of things being real is relative, though. Ford noted with "Nocturnal," just his second film after "A Single Man," that both of his leads die in similarly artistic fashion.

"They both drop to the floor and the camera slides up their body and I thought, 'Maybe this will be my signature,'" he says. "But these are not crime movies where I'm trying to be realistic — they're nostalgic melodrama with some license."

For Mackenzie, though, realistic deaths in films became a personal mission after he worked on an ultra-violent scene in his first film ("The Last Great Wilderness") that resulted in a character being put out of his misery. "I found the making of that movie deeply traumatic," he says. "It really got to me."

And today? In "High Water," characters are dispatched — one shockingly, one with deliberation — and snuffed out in a wink. There is no long, drawn-out death scene — they are here, they are gone. And that can be just as effective as ones that gush with blood. "I'm just not spending as much time with the actual dying anymore," he says.

In the end, it's about striking the right tone — even when working with the Bard's lines.

"In high school I died as Hamlet," recalls Schenkkan, noting that by that part of the play the stage is strewn with three other bodies. "The tension is enormous, and the key is how you make that fourth death the capper without tipping it over. If you make it cathartic, there's pity and sorrow. If you don't do it right, there's a giggle. And that's not good."

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