

AUGUST 26, 2011, 4:00 PM ET

Jesper Christensen on the Fine Art of Playing a Nazi Gynecologist



Getty

Jesper Christensen

"The Debt," a new espionage thriller coming out next week, promises to do for gynecology what the 1976 film "Marathon Man" did for dentistry.

The film, a big-budget adaptation of an obscure 2007 Israeli movie called "Ha-Hov"—it means "The Debt" in Hebrew—[stars Helen Mirren as Rachel Singer, a former Mossad agent with a troubled conscience](#) stemming from a botched 1967 mission to capture a Nazi war criminal.

The acclaimed Danish actor Jesper Christensen gives a riveting performance as Singer's nemesis, Dieter Vogel, aka the "Surgeon of Birkenau" who, in 1967, is working as a gynecologist in East Berlin under an assumed name. (In "Marathon Man,"

Laurence Olivier plays Dr. Christian Szell, a former S.S. dentist known as "The White Angel" with some interesting torture methods up his sleeve.)

Director John Madden said he wanted Mr. Christensen, who played the James Bond villain Mr. White in "Casino Royale" and "Quantum of Solace," because, while he's a huge star in Denmark, he's still under the radar for American audiences. "I didn't want a well-known actor in that role," says Mr. Madden, who directed the Academy Award winning "Shakespeare in Love" and "Proof." The 63-year-old actor, who also has a role in Lars Von Trier's upcoming film "Melancholia," "is just coming to the notice of the English speaking world." Another plus: he's fluent in English and German.

Speakeasy caught up with Mr. Christensen over the phone in advance of the Aug. 31 release of "The Debt" by Focus Features.

Could you talk to me about what it's like to inhabit such a purely evil character as Dieter Vogel?

I'm no method actor. I don't suffer that much like some of my colleagues. I am very foolish and I make a lot of jokes even when I am doing stuff like that. That's my way of keeping alert during filming. So I don't suffer, even when I am doing child molesters or Richard III or whoever. I hear this question more frequently from journalists than actors. This problem has been blown out of proportion.

It seems you're often cast as these disagreeable characters, like the James Bond villain Mr. White and the crabby house butler in "Melancholia"—in terms of evil roles, what did you find to be most refreshing about Vogel?

As villains go, Vogel is a great villain because he's clever and he's articulate. There's a lot to do as an actor with him. I was in the greatest of company with the other actors and John Madden...I had a ball. So when I think of Vogel I am glad. I think about what a great time we had [filming the East Berlin scenes] in Hungary.

Was your performance inspired by any other cinematic villains? The way you were playing with the Mossad agents' minds sort of reminded me of Hannibal Lecter.

No I don't think it was, no. I think this is a very good script as scripts go. There wasn't really much to do or think about or

add to it. So I didn't feel the need to seek inspirations. But everything you see that is impressive, including Hannibal Lecter or whatever, stays with you. Even if you don't use it in any conscious way, it will still be there and show itself somehow. I have of course seen "The Silence of the Lambs," and you never know what has influenced you...these things are not planned. I look at what's called for by the script.

Did you watch the original Israeli film, 'Ha-Hov'?

I never saw it. I didn't want to because it is another script, another movie. I know this is a remake, but I wanted to make it mine. I felt that if I saw the original, I would always have to say "Would I do it like this?" and this would make up 50% of my choices, which is wrong. I am as good an actor as anybody so I thought I'll just go for it, and that would be better.

Aren't you curious to see it now?

Watching it now might be fun. If it came to me somehow, if I had it in my hands, I would watch it.

Without giving away any spoilers, let's just say there are some fight scenes in this movie involving some extremely elderly people. What did you think of that?

I loved the idea of two people fighting who are so incredibly old both of them they had to stop and catch their breath in between. I thought that was great.

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