ONE-ON-ONE
WITH JOSIE BROWN

# Costa-Gavras
## Turns His Camera on Television News

The opening scene in *Mad City*—the newest ethics thriller by the French-Greek filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras—is a series of menacing close-ups: a bank window, a van, a watchful eye. These are intercut with a shot of a hand assembling a high-tech instrument. Costa-Gavras lets the viewer draw the conclusion that the bank is about to be robbed at gun point, then pulls back his camera to reveal that the scary object is in fact a television news camera—an object Costa-Gavras feels can be just as alarming as a gun. "When someone appears out a the blue and puts a microphone and camera in your face, it's an invasion."

A soft-spoken, unassuming man, Costa-Gavras has created some of the most thought-provoking cinema of the past quarter century. His works include the Cannes Film Festival and Academy Award-winning political thriller *Z*, *Missing* (for which Costa-Gavras received an Oscar for Best Screenplay), the critically-acclaimed *Music Box*, and *Betrayed*, a film prescient to the Oklahoma City bombing.

Costa-Gavras shrugs off the mantle of political cinema's godfather. On the contrary, insists Costa-Gavras, "All movies are political. Even *Rambo* movies. They give the impression that one American, with big guns and rippling muscles, can singlehandedly win the Vietnam war. I wonder how many people really do believe that?" Costa-Gavras does not give short shrift to the media's influence over its audiences.

Hence his attraction to *Mad City*. For years, Costa-Gavras had been looking for a movie script that delved into television's power over its viewers. The plot revolves around the movie's two lead characters: Sam Baily (John Travolta), a bluecollar working stiff with a heart of gold who, at wit's end after losing his low-paying job as a security guard in a museum, retaliates by holding the museum's curator and a visiting group of school children hostage; and Max Brackett (Dustin Hoffman), a news reporter whose on-air compassion cost him a network job. He sees his coverage—and manipulation of Baily, the police, and the media—of this hostage crisis as a way to catapult his career back to a major network.

The camera's invasive nature is best depicted in a scene where two of the child hostages are released by a remorseful Baily as an act of good faith. As the children make their way down the museum's steps, a swarming mob of reporters lunge toward them. The children draw back in terror, blinded by the harsh lights of the news cameras. In fact, it is more frightening to them than when they were being held hostage. "You don't want the cameras in your face. It's annoying and aggressive," explains Costa-Gavras. "Inside the museum, there was a guy with a gun, shooting around. But the children think it's fun, that it's make-believe, like Disneyland. It's something they see on television every day. They don't feel jeopardized."

John Travolta takes direction from Costa-Gavras in MAD CITY, which opens November 7th.

But is the camera as deadly as the gun? Absolutely, says Costa-Gavras. "The camera can destroy you in a worse way: little by little. It catches you the moment you don't want to be caught. It is a bigger aggression than any other."

In another pivotal scene, Baily shoots off his gun to show that he means business, and accidentally shoots the museum's other security guard. Max's cameraperson, an intern, calls an ambulance to attend to the downed man, only to get chided by Max for letting her emotions get the better of her: "A reporter must cover the story, not be part of the story." But Max forgoes his own credo and "moves the line" with the notion that the end—attaining positive public opinion for the bewildered Sam, and network visibility for himself—will indeed justify the means.

"This is the journalist's dilemma," summates Costa-Gavras. "You're not supposed to be subjective; you're supposed to stay objective. But I don't believe that is possible. We are not robots. We are subjective with everything we do. In the movie, Max loses his objectivity."

Be it journalism or any other industry, Costa-Gavras realizes none of us are angels. "I believe that all of us, at one time or another, move the line. Some of us move it quite far," Costa-Gavras laughs.

Should the ethics of broadcast journalism be re-evaluated? It is Costa-Gavras' opinion that society will determine if the camera has "crossed the line". Says Costa-Gavras: "In television today, everything happens instantaneously. The reporter does not have time to think about the event, to analyze it. The tape feeds directly to the studio. Who has the right to determine whether it should be seen or not? Society does. Society creates its own taboos."

Unlike many of his movies, the script for *Mad City* was not written by Costa-Gavras, although he collaborated on many of its changes. "When I read this script, some of what I was looking for was there. It was much more violent, and Max was too excessively career-driven. He was ready to kill his mother just to get a story! It was too much, but I saw its possibilities."

To assure authenticity, a television news consultant was hired, and Costa-Gavras and Hoffman visited several newsrooms to observe news crews at work. They even went out with a mobile crew on a police chase.

In the simple-minded Baily, Travolta has a role of a lifetime. A man past his prime, living in a world in which he has lost his emotional grasp. Travolta's bulky body, sad-sack wistfulness and hayseed accent hone to perfection the pathetic demeanor of his character.

While it was Costa-Gavras' suggestion that Travolta bulk up for the role, the actor took it upon himself to grow sideburns that would have made Elvis proud. "John said, 'I want to show you something to get your reaction', then he came out with the sideburns. I loved them, but they were too long. The reaction on the set was that, with that weight and the sideburns, it couldn't be John!"

Does Costa-Gavras see himself as a director who writes, or a writer who directs?

Definitely the former, he says, although he feels that the two disciplines are inseparable. "What is a director? He's more than telling the camera where to go, or the actors where to stand. The characters are created through writing. The director brings that out. A director is essentially a writer. His instrument is his camera...I cannot imagine only having to direct."