

# The Hot Button

November 5, 2003

Less than a week before her birthday, **Melissa Leo** gave audiences a gift.

Like Ginnifer Goodwin in *Mona Lisa Smile* or Frances McDormand in *Something's Gotta Give* or Shohreh Aghdashloo in *House of Sand & Fog*, Leo came from nowhere to add an extra clap of thunder in a movie with some serious big name actors. As **Benicio del Toro's** long-suffering, irrepressible, unrelenting wife in **Alejandro Inarritu's 21 Grams**, Leo managed to blow away audiences with just minutes of screen time. (The premiere was just days before Leo's September birthday.)

The funny thing is, I have distinct memories of Leo's film debut, in an odd little 1984 movie called **Streetwalkin'**. The film turned up during a short period of "High School Honor Student by Day, Hollywood Hooker by Night" movies, like **Angel**. **Streetwalkin'** used the tag, "She dropped out of high school this morning ... Tonight she's a Times Square hooker," but in reality, it turned out to be aiming a little higher. It wasn't really a "girl from 'Hello Larry' takes of her top" kind of flick. Honestly, I don't remember whether Ms. Leo took off her clothes in the film or not. But I do remember being surprised when Leo turned up in **Henry Jaglom's Always** and then again in Jaglom's **Venice/Venice**... from the movie streets to Jaglom's family of high-cheekboned women.

When she turned up as a tough female detective, who never quite needed to be "one of the boys," on *Homicide: Life on the Street*, it felt like a natural step for the actress. The series became my favorite ever hour-long series. They didn't give Melissa a lot to do. Teamed up with **Daniel Baldwin's** Beau Felton, she was the rock to his raging river. ("You will believe a Baldwin can act!") But over time, Detective Kay Howard became Sgt. Kay Howard and sure enough, she became the standard-bearer for the show, holding the solid ground in place as **Andre Braugher** set off his fireworks. Some of my favorite episodes featured Kay Howard going home or getting caught kissing someone by the team videographer, played by **Max Perlich**, or playing her own glamorous sister... a role she had to audition for.

NBC never stopped trying to figure out how to make *Homicide* as big a ratings draw as it was a critics fave and after five seasons, Kay Howard headed out – fortunately spared the fate of her first partner on the show – and *Homicide* jumped the shark. (The actual jump came the day Braugher's Pembleton recovered from his stroke and **Kyle Secor's** Tim Bayliss went bi-sexual... but don't get me started on *Homicide*... I can go all day.)

Then, one morning in Toronto, I went to see **21 Grams**. And by the time I walked out of the theater, one of the moments in the film that no one could stop talking about was **Melissa Leo** washing the grill of her husband's truck.

I sat down with Ms. Leo, really not knowing what to expect. After all, I am used to seeing her as a pretty tough cookie. But her smile was easy, her words well chosen and her enthusiasm for good work unrelenting. She first realized that something special – something beyond the work – was happening based on her role in **21 Grams** when **Sean Penn** rang up to congratulate her on her work in the film. Even with great performances by Penn, Benicio and **Naomi Watts**, people were talking about Melissa.

Much like the pre-Oscar **Adrien Brody**, Leo is ready to find real commercial acceptance in Hollywood. She lives a relatively quiet life in Upstate New York, traveling when work calls for it. She is in that awkward age, between young thing and grown movie woman, an age at which roles sometimes dry up. She's just rarin' to go.

Leo's not one to be unclear about her thoughts. She is daring and open about her life and work, but she is loathe to speak ill of any of her colleagues, even if reason. Her frustration at being replaced on *Homicide* by girls in tight shirts is evident, but never feels petty. Her passion for the work and the fight to

get cast in **21 Grams** is clear. She flew herself to Los Angeles to meet with **Alejandro Inarritu**, just as she's flown herself to L.A. now to be a part of the celebration of the film that's taking place all week. She has come to this strange land to be with this movie family, where you get the feel that she always kind of knew she belonged.

Normally, movies get some heat and then they have to figure out the "Oscar Moments." **Melissa Leo** created her own "Oscar Moment" in **21 Grams**. It was a moment of her character's absolute passion and commitment. Unlike so many of the characters in **21 Grams**, her character knows what she wants... what she needs. What she is about to get is a lot of attention from a lot of awards voters. She wants it. She may even need it. Best of all, she deserves it. And it couldn't happen to a nicer person.