

Vet Actress Melissa Leo Makes *Frozen River* a Hot Indie and Gets an Oscar Nom As Well

There was early Oscar® buzz about the work veteran actress Melissa Leo had done in *Frozen River* ever since the feature won last year's Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize for director Courtney Hunt (her feature film debut). Now, of course, her first nomination for Best Actress is official.

As the star of this tale about a down-and-out unemployed mother of two struggling to feed her kids in the very cold world of upstate New York, the 49-year-old Leo has applied her years of experience as a character actor and former TV star ("Homicide") and become a cinematic force by playing a character that iconically reflects the struggle so many people are coping with now. With this economy in the shitter, homes going into foreclosure and few alternatives available, this film has hit a resonate note with many who have seen it. Her character Ray Eddy gets tapped by "friends" in the local Native American community to help transport illegal immigrants across the Canadian border--a few miles away from her home.

Nobody ever wondered whether Leo would be a working actor--she's been active for years doing theater in NYC, television in LA to numerous feature films throughout the world; her work in both *21 Grams* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* garnered her awards-talk back when these film were released. And she's been in more than 15 films since shooting "Frozen River" (in 2008), as well as doing a three-episode stint on *Law and Order*. But until she was cast in *Frozen River*, Leo didn't get the right feature film lead that she deserved to get years ago.

Q: This is such a tour de force performance--it's a breakthrough role for you even though you've been around so long. How do you feel about that?

ML: I feel awed and overwhelmed by the opportunity that Courtney had provided for me, first of all, in the script that she wrote. Not only is the role the lead, but it's something we rarely see: a woman so completely drawn, not being somebody's somebody, but herself on her own trajectory. I think not since Greg Nava has a director had the balls to count on me to do that. I know the way that I work. I'm a very specific actor. I know how to break down a script and find an arc. It was a joy and a pleasure to do .

Q: What kind of research did you do for this role?

ML: Very little research, in fact. Again, it's because of Courtney. Her script was so complete. She had nine to 10 years of research, a gentle, getting-to-know-people kind of research, sometimes just observing. So the script was very thorough.

We had done a short together [*Althea Faught*], and Misty Upham played the part of the Mohawk and I played--[at the time] she didn't even have a name--"the Blond." We had done that three years before Courtney was able to raise the money to shoot the feature. Not that we practiced or rehearsed--we never even had a table read of the whole feature script. But when an actor has the

information for a long period of time, it sort of filters into you. Also, Courtney's faith in me was in knowing how right I was for the role.

Q: Did you like your character Ray Eddy? Was she somebody you could relate to, or were there times that you wanted to slap her and say "What are you thinking"?

ML: When you're inside of something, you are feeling angst about that person. It probably doesn't help playing it. Josh Brolin is a really good pal, so it was great to talk to him about playing George Bush just before he went to shoot "W" because he wasn't talking about "the President" that he was going to play. He was talking about a character he was going to play, and he went to play "W" with love in his heart for him.

You have to come there as an audience. It was up to Courtney's script. I was perfectly aware that Ray Eddy says some pretty scathing, racist things. That's who she was: she was a narrow-minded woman. I think that's a good thing to show people, so I was happy to do that. It was just a joy and a pleasure.

Q: She's also a consistently strong woman despite everything going on around her. Did you find it emotionally trying?

ML: No; again, I wish I could tell you some stories of terror and turmoil on it. I've been acting almost 30 years. There might have been a day earlier when I would "lose myself" more in a character. When I'm working, I am working--I am working to make you feel, and that's not me feeling all that--do you know? I'm thinking about where that light is, where the camera is, what was that note that Courtney just gave me about this. So I'm working to get you all to feel. I have a lot of fun doing it, quite frankly.

Q: You looked pretty comfortable shooting a gun. Have you done that before?

ML: I have handled a gun or two in my time. I have never shot at anything living. I don't know if I'd have the heart to do that. When I was 16, or 17 years old, I lived out in Oklahoma for awhile. I shot a lot of guns back then. I was told a lot by gun handlers, "Oh, you have to use two hands," and the kick, and "blah blah blah."

It was a .22; I know what a .22 feels like in my hand, I know a .22 has a little bit of kick to it, but you can certainly shoot a .22 with one hand. And I think that information helped sell it. There was no blank in the gun, there was nothing in the gun. I had to perform the kick of it. So I think it looks like a pretty real shot.

There was also an argument on the set. The set decorators had to drill a hole into the door of Lila's trailer, and they came with their little screwdriver to make that hole right in the middle of the door. And Courtney and I were "No no no no no, wait, wait, wait."

No, she's not shooting in the middle of the door. Her husband's most likely in there, and some other chica, in her mind. She's not going to shoot "someone" who might be standing right by that

door. No, it's a warning shot to get attention: "LISTEN to me!" She just bangs a hole in the bottom of the door. So they finally went along with us and put the hole in the bottom of the door.

Q: Was it tough working in such cold weather?

ML: Well, there's two answers to that. First of all, I have to recognize our crew and our shooter, Reed Morano, this itty bitty, tiny woman. They froze their asses off, there's no question about it. It was an arduous shoot for them. There was one night our camera froze up, there was one night we had to move into a sound stage to work because it was just too cold out. I, however, saw this opportunity in front of me. I had just come from shooting something in South Africa.

I hit the ground running, I used all my 10 years living with a ski teacher and what he knows about dressing for the weather and changing your socks in the middle of the day so your feet don't get cold. If your feet get cold, you're done. Also there were no trailers for us or anything like that. The holding area for Misty and I really was that Dodge Spirit--the Mighty Spirit, as I called her--and just kept comfortable in the car. We could turn it on from time to time and get a little heat going, never wanted to get too warm. And the weather was a part of Ray's life. It was just another thing that actually added to the performance.

Q: Will audiences walk away with certain message from this film especially about single parents trying to raise children by themselves?

ML: The message of the film is really Courtney's job. I'm sure when she worked with the editor, Kate Williams, they thought a lot about how they wanted that to land. Motherhood is the uniting factor in there, without doubt--and maybe beyond motherhood, parenthood.

Q: The responsibilities of raising children...

ML: Exactly, and that children need to be raised. You can't just have them and set them free. It's a responsibility. So whatever that thing is--the shape of the film, the way it has all that suspense in it, and so on--as an actor, I'm not terribly aware of that as we shoot. I leave that to the director. She was fully competent for the job, [even] having never done it before.

And I actually learned things. When I saw that first edit, "Oh, that's why we did it like that." But as we shoot, I just go scene by scene. I'm guided by her, take notes at the end of the day how scenes landed so when we shoot out of order, we can hopefully help the editor sew it together in the end.

Q: How is your character different at the end from the way she is at the beginning?

ML: It's a very good question, because that's the heart of how the film, in the end, works. It doesn't tie it up with a pretty little bow at the end, and it doesn't leave everything sort of hanging. I didn't really understand what happened at the end, and a lot of films fall in that category. This has this very happy medium. A lot of times at these screenings we come in at the very end, [the last] five or 10 minutes of the film, and the audiences are rapt, there is a sense of satisfaction at the end of it, yeah.

Ray Eddy grows and changes, and becomes a better person. She does things she never anticipated doing. She makes a sorta-kinda friend out of somebody she wouldn't have given the time of day to. So by the end of the film, she hasn't solved all of her problems but she is a better human being for it.

When my son saw the film, he pointed out that he thought it was a little consumerist of her to want this double-wide trailer. They had a trailer, what's the matter...? I pointed out to him that she shifts what her needs are. She realizes that what she needs is a roof over their heads and not one that's been burned out--maybe a little step up instead of a big step. She's become a better person at the end.

Q: One possible flaw to her--or to the film--was her way of dealing with men. Did you work out her back story in your head ?

ML: I don't know where you get that she was so bad with men. I think she was actually kind of stoic with them. She has a 15-year-old child and a five-year-old child. The father of both of those children is the same man. For many years Ray stood by her man, and for many years, she went, "Well, aren't you going to look for him this time?" She went looking for him, trying to drag him out of it, giving him an ultimatum--as many a co-dependent has done before today.

Q: Well, that makes her an enabler who has been enabling him for far too long.

ML: Of course she's enabled him, and she's taught her son to lie because she's a liar. Courtney doesn't write good people and bad people. She writes human beings, with all the gray in between.

Q: What was it like working with Native American Misty Upham who plays Lila Little Wolf?

ML: Oh, I could go on and on about working with Misty. First of all, let me make it very clear: Misty Upham is a very different lady from Lila Little Wolf. She is a Blackfeet Indian; they are a Northwest [tribe]. She did take on Mohawk characteristics within the Native American community; there are different characteristics tribally. She's 100% Blackfeet Indian, and she's lived in a very Indian--not a rez life, but a very Indian life.

She is a consummate actress, it was a delight to work with her. We work in a very different way. She asks a lot of questions and simply does what the director tells her. She doesn't break down a script in the way that I do. She just comes to it to find out what the director wants from her, and boy, does she deliver.

She would ask Courtney these little questions, and then another little question, like "What is she on about?"--and then she'd do it and I'd get it. The other thing I delighted in about her and really made me have respect for her is: I'm such a serious worker. I'm very serious when I'm working, and this was a serious thing for me. So I can get a little snarky if things go awry. Not like "Where's my water?" but like, "No, the money was over here, it has to be over here. It can't be over there."

Specifics are very important to me. So I'd get a little snarky with Misty from time to time, as much as I love her too. And she would snap right back at me, and in funny ways too--wickedly funny. Very bright. Misty's become a very close friend. She has actually stayed in my house in Los Angeles.

As an aside: the makeup artist Crystal Shade lives up in Washington. At one point, she had not had an opportunity to see the film. So [she to take] a 24-hour bus ride from Washington to L.A. to get a chance to see the movie. A bus ride, and then another 24-hour bus ride back home to Washington--because that's what she can afford. She's a Native American makeup artist. So I learned more and more about what the realities are for Native Americans in this country living today. It is a frightening reality. Courtney's film actually only touches the tip of the iceberg about it.

Q: Producer Heather Rae is also a Native American; what was her role in this whole process?

ML: I brought Heather Rae to the project. I had never met her before. I was out at Sundance a couple of years before and Michael Greenwald, who was my then-agent, mentioned that this woman named Heather Rae, who had run the Native American festival at Sundance for 15 years; she wanted to meet me. She knew I was a client of his.

I was hanging out with [screenwriter] Kit Carson--he was out there with the re-issuing of *Paris, Texas* that year--where he finally got the credit due him. So Michael brought me up, and there was Carson and Heather Rae talking to each other. I don't know if you've ever met her, but she's one of the most beautiful human beings you'll ever meet, both in her physical self and in her inner self.

I met her, and within three minutes of talking to her, I said, "I've got a script you've got to read." I knew that Courtney had been working already with [producer] Chip Hourihan, but any help we could get, I figured. And it was a very, very nice marriage. She was an integral part of getting the film shot. A lot of the [cast] are experienced actors from a reservation in Canada, Gonawaga. Heather was absolutely integral in the bringing down those people and making the deal.

There is an Indian world, and it was very helpful to have her along on that regard, and just because she is such a decent, beautiful person. The trio of Molly Connors, Chip Hourihan and Heather Rae is a really good example of how the movie got made, and how movies should be made. It's a collaborative art, and that collaboration of our three producers was golden.

Q: Were the Native Americans that were on the reservation that you went to accepting of the film?

ML: {Courtney's} short [that was the basis of this feature] was shot in Massena on the St. Lawrence, where there is indeed reservation land on the state side and on the Canadian side. Courtney had spent 10 years up there with those people--not constantly; her husband's from there. They'd go up and visit, and she'd make her observations and meet her people. I don't think she even gets what she did, of making this liaison.

The tribal council up there is made up of three on that particular rez. She eventually had had two of the tribal council agree to it and one not, and that's all the vote that she needed for it. She wasn't obsequious about what she was doing.

She said "I'm making a movie, this is what it's about. Do you want to read the script?" and was very open and extraordinarily respectful as she approached them. When we went to go do the feature--the infrastructure in Massena, quite frankly, doesn't exist. There's no hospital, there's no fire department. So Plattsburg had a better infrastructure for us, really, and we could go out on Lake Champlain and use that as the St. Lawrence.

Q: When you are working on a film, not in chronological order, do you have a notion of where you're going at all times? Or is there a double consciousness about it?

ML: It is probably more of a double consciousness of it. As I worked on this particular role, I recall taking far more notes at the end of the day than I did earlier on my own to get where that scene landed when we actually shot it, and then to be able to go and marry the scenes together in that way. But again, it's a lot more Courtney's job to do it. For me to stay truthful in the moment as we're going along, I do the best I can do, then she can make that shape when she cuts it with her editor.

Q: How did you meet Courtney to do that short?

ML: I had been invited by [Focus Features founder] James Shamus, when *21 Grams* was coming out, to come up to his hometown in upstate New York for a local screening. He does a sneak preview every year of what he likes best of Focus [Films]'s releases that year. I live not far from there myself. There was an after-party, and Courtney came up to me and asked if I'd read her short.

If you meet her, she's a fearsome woman in many ways, but she's also kind of shy and awkward, too. It's not the easiest thing for her, to go up to people. But she has a gut and an instinct like you wouldn't believe, and she knew I was who she wanted to do this with, and where it would go from there--I don't know if she even knew in that moment--but that emboldened her and up she came. I said "Show it to me" and one read and I said "Absolutely, I'll go do this with you."

Q: Is there a difference between working with a first-time director like Courtney and a more established one?

ML: There is a difference. It's funny what an actor requires from a director. But what we need most of all is that the director in fact knows what they want their film to be, and that she knew. How do you make a movie? We taught her as we went along--all of us: Heather Rae, Chip, me, the shooter--and she learned, a learning curve like you would not believe. She is very well suited to the job, and she was an incredible guide. I would never deign to help direct, but to help movie making I would give the clues where I thought necessary, hopefully, in an appropriate way.

Q: Is there inherently a difference between a male director's approach and a female director's approach to their material and in working with actors?

ML: Well, two things. One is that it's very well established that we're very good at multi-tasking, we women, and men are more single-purpose. So there's that sort of difference, and I think that that multi-tasking is ideal for film directing.

But the only other real difference--besides different personalities that has nothing to do with gender--[is] the women have a harder time getting listened to on the set. And it's always a fight: "No, I said this. Would you please try this. How else can I ask you, I want you to put the camera here." Men don't have to deal with that crap. So that's the biggest difference, and generally speaking, as the shoot goes along and they realize that the chica knows what she's doing, that becomes a non-issue.

Q: In your career, what are the benchmarks for you, like [working with] a specific director or actor?

ML: I wish I had answers to give you to that. I try very, very hard to be in the here-and-now and be present. I love working, and don't even mind the obstacles of working--like a director that you'd rather not be working with, and finding the best in it instead of the worst in it.

My career is a patchwork quilt of so many things, and breakthrough after breakthrough from the first year out--two days hired on a soap opera, and the next day they wanted me to sign a three-year contract. Eventually I was nominated for a Daytime Emmy for it. Nothing really came of that, and on I marched.

And then "Homicide: Life in the Streets" came along eventually, and that was very lucrative for five years, but a little frustrating because I didn't get to work that much. And then I couldn't get hired. They didn't want "Kay Howard." I was too believable in the roles, again and again!

Then came *21 Grams*; "Oh wow, everything's gonna change!" Nothing changed. Everybody thinks because Guillermo Arriaga wrote *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* I must have gotten *Three Burials*--it must have been a shoo-in--talking to him about it all along. Nahhh.

Mr. [Tommy Lee] Jones had wanted several other women before me. [Casting director] Jeanne McCarthy is an old, old friend from back in New York when she was hoofing the pavement with us actors, and she found out through my old manager, Bill Tresh, that I was in L.A. and [she went] "oh my god, she could..." Two days later, they flew me down to West Texas to meet Mr. Jones, and I landed the job that way.

Q: "Mister" Jones?

ML: Ohhhhhh, yeah.

Q: It was like that from everyone?

ML: No, that's my respect I pay him, absolutely. I don't know the man well enough to call him Tom, or Tommy.

Q: At one point, I started laughing even though it was a serious scene, because she's so cynical and hard-assed in a way. That performance worked because of how lived-in it felt, and you managed to add in a lot of tones to the character.

ML: Oh good, we love it when you laugh, yes.

Q: How do you feel about this Oscar® business?

ML: It feels quite delightful. Am I thinking I'm going to get an Oscar®? No, I'm thinking, "That's good publicity. That might help me get work."

That's what I'm thinking. So spread the word.

[Brad Balfour](#)

Veteran interviewer and pop culture chronicler

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