

## **For Your Consideration: Melissa Leo for Best Actress in *Frozen River***

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When I saw *Frozen River* last January at Sundance, it knocked me out. I'd been a **Melissa Leo** fan since she played Det. Sgt. Kay Howard on *Homicide: Life on the Street*. We became friends through the Woodstock Film Festival, and I adore *Racing Daylight*, her movie with **David Strathairn** that has yet to get theatrical distribution. When I saw *Frozen River (FR)*, I discovered that when an actress who's also a friend appears on screen, it's doubly interesting because you're rooting for her, and you want her to be great, and you know she can be great. I saw the drama about two struggling single mothers forging a friendship while smuggling on the NY-Canadian border, and I literally wept in two ways. I wept because this particular story moved me emotionally but, also, to watch someone you love create a work of art is extremely affecting. And, over the process of becoming an advocate for *FR* that week in Park City, I bumped into **Michael Barker** and **Tom Bernard** of **Sony Pictures Classics** at a screening. I told them they had to see *FR*: it's tremendous, I told them; it's adult and has Melissa Leo, you know her from *21 Grams* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, and she should be on the Oscar track. And, by festival's end, not only had Michael and Tom bought *FR*, but Quentin Tarantino and the jury awarded it best narrative feature and it went on to open New Directors/New Films at MOMA. Last month, I sat down beside Melissa for a chat:

**Thelma Adams:** Melissa, when did you step into *FR* to play Ray Eddy?

**Melissa Leo:** Five years ago-ish, I was in Chatham, NY with James Schamus [Focus Features]. He'd brought *21 Grams* up there for a screening. At the after-party, a wide-eyed blond-haired gal came up to me and said 'I have a short, will you read it?' And I said, 'sure.' I read a script called *Frozen River* about two characters: the blond and the native; they didn't even have names. About four years ago, [writer-director] **Courtney Hunt**, [co-star] **Misty Upham** and I went up to Massena, NY and shot the short. After, I saw that short and was very impressed by what she had done, Courtney said, 'wanna do the feature?' And I said, 'oh, I didn't know you had one,' and 'sure, let's do the feature.'" So every six, eight months I would call Courtney and say, "Are we going to make that movie?" And she would say, "oh, yeah, no, I'll get right back to you," so I would kick-start her again to go look for the financing. Eventually we found it in her own backyard through her husband and his business associates.

**TA:** Melissa, your character is tough, and yet when her sons are around, her behavior is warm, natural. When Ray Eddy's getting ready for work and the younger son is there, there's a real bond. I know you have a great connection with children - I've seen that with my own daughter - and you're really present and you can see that on screen.

**ML:** What you have to realize is that little actor never acted before -- and he wasn't sure that he wanted to. So, it took a lot of work with me and the older boy and sometimes Courtney as well. Sometimes there are actually all three of us off-camera with the little boy on screen prodding him in this direction, prodding him in that direction.

**TA:** *FR* was in development for years, but when the money came did it happen quickly?

**ML:** It was in the works for a long time and then we had a lot of issues: the winter had not gotten cold enough to freeze the water we needed frozen, and then we started going and the water began to unfreeze. So there were both a money factor and a weather factor that made us have to giddy-up and go and just shoot it.

**TA:** Courtney told me she pulled the shoot together the week before ...and she cast a lot of non-actors.

**ML:** Yes. We went up to the reservation outside of Montreal, Tonawanda, and a casting woman - they have a theater group - held auditions up there, Misty and Courtney and I met with the actors; they were a varied group of both actors with experience and others who were just willing to give it a try.

**TA:** The movie revolves around two great central performances - you and Misty. The acting avoids melodrama. Is that partially because Misty is so solid?

**ML:** Solid is a really good word for her. Misty, however, is a consummate actress. And not really very much like her Lila Littlewolf lead. There's a lot of gregariousness in Misty, she's deeply, deeply wise I'll be walking somewhere with her and I'll go, "Misty, are you sure it's this way?" and she'll go "yeah, I'm sure" and, alright, I'm with Misty. She always knows where she's headed. She's remarkable.

**TA:** Has *FR* changed her career?

**ML:** That's waiting yet to see what happens with it. What Misty is acutely aware of and, I think is worth mentioning, is that there has never in the history of film been anything like her performance. Misty and her native community across the US are aware of it: she's not playing an Indian, she's playing a person with a complete life, with the ups and the downs of it, the wisdom and the mistakes, and a rounded person whose tale does not hinge on their being an Indian or not. It's an extraordinarily rare thing to have that kind of character in a film and I hope that she and the performance are celebrated and she can parlay it into other things. She has the talent to do it.

**TA:** Your character is also strong and fully realized. How much of that was on the page? What did you contribute?

**ML:** It's difficult for me to know how much of myself I end up bringing. Comments from people after the fact like my mom's friend who just can't get over the fact that I really knew how to look for that change in that couch [laughs]. She's known my history. She's known me my whole life. I'm not quite sure what parts of the character are parts of my self. What I do know is first of all in the writing of Ray Eddy, she was a whole, complex character with flaws that Courtney wrote, and Courtney even was, as many writers are when they write, her character. And very, very generously gave me the character when it came my turn to play Ray Eddy and Courtney, then, took a backseat. So there were things in her writing that are primary to who Ray Eddy is, and there's what I then brought to it, which is innate in me. I'm not sure how to describe what that is. And, then, there's also the direction that Courtney gave me. With another director at the helm, and me in that part, it wouldn't have been the same thing because Courtney made me make Ray more likeable, that even though she might be doing things people might question, that you would still care for her. That's very much Courtney's hand in the direction. Courtney had a very keen eye that that was important and, now, in viewing the film, which is very different from reading or performing the film, I understand and see the importance of that. So Courtney's direction of me was a big, big part of it.

**TA:** What was Courtney's approach?

**ML:** What a director must have is a vision of their film - and Courtney had that in spades. She

knew every heartbeat and turn of her film as we worked so I knew I could trust her. There were some bumps to get through in the first handful of days of shooting. Courtney's never really been on a set before. There's a way things work that everybody else there knows because the gaffer and the grips and the electric, they've all been on lots of sets...

**TA:** ... as have you...

**ML:** As have I. There was a really scary day about three days in. We were shooting late in the film, not when we're out and Mark Boone Jr. is being mean to those poor Chinese girls and then he shoots me in the ear, but right after I get in the car. So we're starting the scene. We haven't shot the other stuff with Mark Boone and the girls, where Ray gets shot in the ear, but we're shooting right after when I get in the car. So we're in the car, it's pouring out with snow, with me driving to the start mark. Courtney's in the back seat with what they call a clamshell, which is a monitor so she can see what the camera's seeing. And I turn to look over my shoulder, quick as I'm driving to the start mark. 'Courtney, do you think that we've been driving a little while and now we start the dialog or have I **just got in the car, and we're starting the dialog,** **Does that question make sense?**

**TA:** Yes.

**ML:** Didn't make sense to Courtney! [Laughter] So then, I'm now about to act like a woman who's just got shot in the ear, I'm getting a little amped up because I know my face is going to be about this close to the camera in about three seconds, because they're going to call rolling and I ask Courtney one more time [voice rising] 'just be very clear with me if this is a little while down the road or if I've just gotten in the car?' and she says [softly, whispery] 'don't talk to me like that.'

**TA:** And what did you do?

**ML:** I remembered that I was working with a first-time director. We were going to have to work this out after we got the shot. They rolled the camera. We did the take. We got there. I got out of the car. I looked for a producer and I said, [loudly] "talk to her!" And they did. And it never happened again. That's the amazing thing about Courtney. Is that she could learn even as we were doing it. And when we got through that third day, and that particular bump, and we came back the next day, something had changed. I knew we were going to be OK.

**TA:** Does that typically happen on a set? Is there that moment when it galvanizes or it doesn't?

**ML:** This was very different for me in so many ways because here I was being given that opportunity that I have waited a lifetime for, the opportunity to carry the film. So everything mattered that much more to me. I was that much more involved in all of it. There's all kind of utter nonsense that goes on onset but, somehow, you get the darn thing in the can anyway.