

# MARK

Interview MATT MUELLER

# ROMANEK

## THE DIRECTOR TALKS US THROUGH HIS WORK- FROM JACKO VIDEOS TO NEVER LET ME GO

With a director’s eye for detail, Mark Romanek walks into the Toronto hotel suite where we’re meeting and immediately dims the lights. When I ask the bearded, soft-spoken filmmaker if the harsh glare was offending his visual sensibilities, he laughs and explains that it’s more down to the fact that he’s still feeling tender from the night before, when *Never Let Me Go* held its red-carpet premiere. “It was very glamorous – not my kind of thing,” he says. “A lot of people came up to me at the party and said they were very moved by the film. That’s all I can hope for.”

That has to register as immensely gratifying for the Chicago-born filmmaker, both because the delicate, strange lyricism of Kazuo Ishiguro’s source novel had many decreeing it ‘unfilmable’ but it comes in the wake of Romanek’s acrimonious departure from Universal’s *Wolfman* remake (more on that later). In translating a vision of blighted, abbreviated lives, Romanek evokes a poetic atmosphere with luscious, painterly visuals and a drab, ‘50s-style English setting in which the science behind medical cloning would seem out of reach. But he loved that dystopian dichotomy, toying with the idea of creating a futuristic atmosphere but ultimately deciding that, “This should be the science fiction film with no sci-fi in it. It’s really a love story, and about mortality and how we choose what’s important in a brief time.” Finding his three key actors proved daunting. For the lead role of Kathy, “we looked at the cream of the crop” but it wasn’t until Fox’s studio chief texted him from the first Sundance screening of *An Education* saying, ‘Hire the genius Mulligan’ that they settled on Carey Mulligan. From there, Keira Knightley swiftly signed up to play her best friend/love rival Ruth, and Andrew Garfield rounded out the cast as the troubled innocent they both love. Romanek couldn’t have lassoed a hotter Brit cast in his wildest dreams, not least because Garfield has since been anointed the new Spider-Man. “You could see that he was great and destined for something like that,” he muses.

*Never Let Me Go* is Romanek’s second feature in eight years, the other; the chilling, obsessional character study *One Hour Photo*. It’s a work rate that could be deemed Kubrickian, which is appropriate given that *2001: A Space Odyssey* is the film that first inspired Romanek to become a filmmaker. Born and raised in Chicago, he was borrowing his uncle’s Super-8 camera to make movies at 15, being exposed to the “cool, weird, mind-expanding” works of Kenneth Anger and Stan Brakhage at what must



**“JANET HADN’T SEEN MICHAEL IN A WHILE  
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be the most progressive public high school in America, and – thanks to a connection of his father’s – virtually gatecrashing his way into a job on Brian De Palma’s *The Fury* at 17.

“I was like a pig in shit,” says Romanek, who a few years later was directing his first feature, *Static*, a quirky oddity he co-wrote with actor Keith Gordon about a crucifix-maker who invents a TV set he claims can broadcast images from heaven. Today he looks back on it as “an embarrassment – which annoys some people because I think it’s fondly recalled in England. I was a sheltered, suburban kid, I didn’t have any point of view about the human condition.” Instead, Romanek moved into the propulsive world of music videos, becoming a sought-after, experimental whiz-kid called on by A-listers like the Chili Peppers, Jay-Z and Beck.

Romanek’s music video output is counted as some of the best ever, from the unbearably poignant (Johnny Cash’s *Hurt*) to the the monochrome masterpiece that is Michael and Janet Jackson’s angry duet ‘Scream’, although Romanek refutes its tag as ‘most expensive music video ever’. “They came to me five weeks before they wanted it and said, ‘We want the biggest, most amazing video you’ve ever seen.’ All we could do was throw money at it, but *The Guinness Book of World Records* is wrong.”

As for working with the pop legend, Romanek says it was “exciting and strange”, but that Jackson came surrounded by “sycophants and manipulators. Janet hadn’t seen him in a while and was shocked by this evil posse that had him wrapped around their finger. It was unpleasant. But I also saw how close Janet and Michael were – they were just a brother and sister.”

In spite of his accolade-showered day job, however, he was stymied in his efforts to move back into features. Romanek found



himself offered “‘70s TV show adaptations like *The Mod Squad*, shit like that... I didn’t want to make music-video-y movies.” He wrote and directed *One-Hour Photo* out of frustration because he knew “it was something they couldn’t say no to”, casting Robin Williams as a loner obsessed with a family whose photos he develops.

When the movie was well-received, Romanek spent the rest of the ‘00s developing projects that failed to come to fruition... And then came *The Wolfman*, which Romanek walked away from three weeks before shooting. Romanek insists it wasn’t a disagreement over budget “we just couldn’t agree on what the movie should be. Some of my casting survived but the film didn’t resemble what I set out to do. I had to go it because I needed closure.” Romanek’s wounds are still raw. “I have no regrets but it was traumatic. I don’t know if people can understand how hard a decision that was. I was curled up in a foetal position for months. I thought, ‘Did I just blacklist myself?’”

However, Romanek’s story comes with a happy ending. Knowing he needed to get back in the saddle, he was jubilant when Fox Searchlight offered him *Never Let Me Go*, which ended up being selected to open the recent London Film Festival – a choice with significance to Romanek who made London his home after moving his family over while editing . With things looking bright again, he’s not sure what he’ll be directing next, although a dark comedy with Ben Stiller is on the cards.

But if he can avoid pigeonholing, he’ll be content. “I don’t want to be known as one type of director,” he states. “I like being posed an aesthetic problem and then come up with a solution on how to solve it.” Which makes him sound very much like his hero. “Stanley Kubrick started it for me but I’d love to eventually not be compared to anybody.” You’ll need to be more prolific then. Romanek laughs. “I’m working on it...”