

While the Greek economic meltdown and anti-government demonstrations meant *The Two Faces Of January* could only shoot in Athens for four days, it's the only film to ever gain access inside the Parthenon.

ON SET!

Greek tragedy

THE TWO FACES OF JANUARY | The writer of *Drive* directs a thriller set in '60s Athens.

➤ In a side street in Istanbul, situated in what was once the city's Greek neighbourhood but now comes saddled with the unsavoury nickname "the den of thieves", Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst and Oscar Isaac are strolling through an outdoor market heaving with trinkets, knick-knacks and old books. Decked out in dapper, early '60s fashions – Mortensen in a cream linen suit, Dunst in a flower-patterned summer frock, Isaac a bit less swish in ordinary street duds – there's a *Mad Men* vibe in the air. You wouldn't be surprised to witness Don Draper suddenly turn the corner.

It's October 2012 and although we find ourselves in Turkey's continent-straddling metropolis, today's impeccably outfitted location for this adaptation of a lesser-known Patricia

Highsmith novel is doubling for Athens, where Rydal (Isaac), an American expat living in Greece, is playing tour guide to Chester (Mortensen) and Colette MacFarland (Dunst), a glamorous American couple touring Europe. In the scene playing out, Colette stops to ogle a gold bracelet with a two-headed snake design ("a protective charm," Rydal informs her), Chester offers to buy it for her and Rydal haggles with the stall owner in Greek, skimming a 50 per cent commission for himself without the couple's knowledge.

There's a relaxed bonhomie between the trio today, with Dunst turning to Isaac and Mortensen after one take and saying, "Did you like my fake laugh there? 'A-ha-ha-ha-ha!!'" The actress giggles. As they amble back up the narrow alley to take their original positions, Isaac gees Dunst along – "Come on, sunshine!" – as writer-director Hossein Amini wanders out from an adjacent

courtyard, part of the old monastery and occupied by a herd of goats, to confer with his actors.

The *Mad Men* comparison stretches to *TWFOJ*'s sparring male leads, both ensconced, not unlike Draper himself, in Highsmith's favoured realm of flawed, morally duplicitous men engaging in dark thrills. Tom Ripley might be the author's most famous creation, but Rydal and Chester are cut from similar cloth. They're both con artists, albeit operating on different scam levels: Chester swindles high-stakes investors; Rydal's a low-level grifter who goes to the MacFarlands' hotel one night to return the snake-headed bracelet Colette left behind and finds Chester dragging the body of a seemingly unconscious man down a corridor.

From that point, Rydal gets tangled up in Chester's web of intrigue, with who's telling the truth when not always apparent. "Hoss and I solidified what was true and what wasn't about >>

Viggo Mortensen:
"I already know
that this movie gets
better and better with
each viewing. I think this
will go down as one
of the gems of
my career."

'All the characters have secret desires... No one's purely good or evil'

VIGGO MORTENSEN

"In the book,
Colette [Kirsten
Dunst's character] is very
different," says writer-
director Hossein Amini. "She's
almost a nymphomaniac, not
very educated; and is almost
an unwitting part of what
happens to her."

Seeing the sights:
Viggo Mortensen
and Kirsten Dunst as
tourists Chester and
Colette MacFarland.



Measured performance: Dunst stands poised for 'action'; Mortensen and writer-director Hossein Amini; Oscar Isaac as tour guide and grifter Rydal.

a thriller with ice in its veins, blood on its hands and an authentic vibe thanks to fabulous use of locations in Athens, Crete and Istanbul.

"The psychological battle is, for me, the strongest thing about the story," says Amini. "I love the idea of two men going against each other and even though one will have to destroy the other, there is a respect and almost an affectionate love between the two while that's going on."

It's a simple fact that Highsmith's women are less interesting than her men. But Dunst looks set to bring a flirtatious sophistication to Colette, whose attentions sway from Chester towards the more age-appropriate Rydal as the tension escalates; plus, she looks pretty swish in vintage '60s frocks, even if comfort wasn't always built into her wardrobe. "Yeah, I definitely have a period brassiere on," grimaces Dunst with a smile while yanking out her blonde hair extensions when she sits down on set with *Buzz*. "It's actually a Marks & Spencer's old-lady version, so it's not too bad. We'll cheat it in the more revealing scenes. But as soon as you get dressed in the costumes, it makes you walk differently and behave differently."

Despite being set in 1962, Amini and his cast were keen that the film never feel like an airless museum piece. "Just because you're in a period film doesn't mean you have to start talking differently," says Dunst. "Well, maybe a little bit!" She laughs, recounting how Mortensen keeps

ad libbing lines to imbue Chester with a bit of frivolity. "Viggo has some great one-liners. Hopefully some of them will make it into the cut."

While all three characters behave badly, Mortensen sees the trio not as amoral but simply as complicated and contradictory as most people are. "Everybody's got their secrets," he says. "Even the nicest, calmest nun has the possibility to think strange things or hold resentments. All these characters have secret desires and their own sense of morality. No one's purely good or evil in this story." While Mortensen makes the most of his opportunity to bring a classic Highsmith villain to life, *January* ends up being Isaac's film, the *Inside Llewyn Davis* star managing to make Rydal appealing even as he allows himself to be sucked into Chester's vortex of greed and venality.

For Amini, who keeps the balance of power shifting throughout as Rydal and Chester's duel acquires a father-son dimension, the narrative journey was about conveying the concept implied by the enigmatic title: that, eventually, the two men will become one. "It's a film about jealousy, drunkenness, rivalry," muses Amini. "They're all negative human qualities but it goes back to that whole idea behind Greek tragedy where men pit themselves against the gods and they lose. But in defeat, there's something heroic about them." **MMU**

ETA | 16 MAY *The Two Faces Of January* opens this summer.

Rydal's past, even if you don't find it out explicitly in the story," Isaac tells *Buzz*. "This is a coming-of-age story for Rydal." 'Hoss' is Amini, the British-Iranian screenwriter of *Drive* making his directorial debut with Highsmith's suspense thriller, which he fell in love with at university and spent 15 years driving to the big screen.

Amini sees his debut in the gritty vein of *Plein Soleil*, the original 1960 adaptation of Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, rather than Anthony Minghella's sumptuous 1999 version, and drew inspiration from Hitchcock and other French and Italian thrillers of the era, including Antonioni's *L'Avventura* – which also made a big impression on Dunst. "That was very reminiscent of the vibe Hoss wanted, and of what it would have been like to be in Greece then," she says. Amini has studied his teachers well: *January* is stylish, elegant and old-fashioned in the best sense of the word,