

# Passionate action-packed John Wick



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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Action gets a stylish makeover with John Wick, a bloody tale of revenge and redemption with Keanu Reeves flexing his muscle as a retired hit man who is forced back into action by a brutal Russian mobster.

In this super-violent and action-packed revenge thriller from Chad Stahelski, Wick's mourning of his beloved wife is interrupted when his 1969 Boss Mustang catches the eye of sadistic thug Iosef Tarasov (Alfie Allen in top form). When John refuses to sell the car, Iosef and his henchmen break into his house and steal it, beating John unconscious and leaving Daisy dead. Unwittingly, they have just reawakened one of the most brutal assassins the underworld has ever seen.



John's search for his stolen vehicle takes him to a side of New York City that tourists never see, a hyper-real, super-secret criminal community, where John Wick was once the baddest guy of all. After learning that his attacker is the only son of a former associate - vicious Russian crime boss Viggo Tarasov (Michael Nyqvist) - John turns his attention to vengeance. As word spreads that the legendary hit man is after his son, Viggo offers a generous bounty to anyone who can bring John down.

## Remorseless killing machine

With a veritable army on his trail, John once again becomes the remorseless killing machine the underworld once feared, launching a pitched battle against Viggo and his soldiers that could mean the end of them both.

The film is the product of 87Eleven, one of Hollywood's most elite stunt groups and one-stop shop for blockbuster fight

scenes founded by two stuntman veterans: 46-year-old Chad Stahelski and 42-year-old David Leitch (co-producer and co-director).

These veterans are the guys filmmakers call in when a major action movie is in preproduction. They create, shoot, and edit original stunt sequences - and then pitch them straight to the director. After being hired, they whip the film's stars into shape and teach them the pre-planned fight choreography.

Finally, when filming begins, Stahelski and Leitch are on set as the film's stunt coordinator and fight choreographer, and their crew of stunt performers serves as the stars' stunt doubles and the evil henchmen. The company has been so successful - a few of its recent films include *The Bourne Legacy*, *Expendables 3*, the *Hunger Games* series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Jurassic World*, *Anchorman 2*, *Wolverine* and *Dracula Untold* - that Stahelski and Leitch now make their kickass movie debut with *John Wick*.



## The stunt world

The transition from stuntman to filmmaker, though rare, is natural. As Leitch and Stahelski began filming their own scenes and pitching them to directors, they learned how to photograph and edit.

"As a stunt guy, you become a mini-director," Leitch says. "You're talking to actors about performance. The way you present a stunt is tied in to the way you photograph it, so you're hanging out with the cinematographer. You learn tricks to make action look more dynamic - having the fight come toward you or shooting on a longer lens to compress the speed."

Before founding 87Eleven, Stahelski and Leitch kicked, punched, and fought their way to the top of the stunt world for more than 20 years. The pair first met in the early 1990s at a karate academy. Leitch then worked with Brad Pitt, executing the star's combat scenes in movies like *Fight Club*, *Mr and Mrs Smith*, and *Troy*.

Stahelski worked as Brandon Lee's double (and eventual replacement) in *The Crow* and performed Keanu Reeves' fight work in the *Matrix* movies alongside an Asian stunt crew.

"While filming *The Matrix*, we studied how a Chinese fight-choreography team trains actors before production starts so that they can participate in action sequences in a more dynamic way," explains Leitch. "We wanted to bring that to Western cinema."

They found the perfect script when they read Derek Kolstad's original screenplay.

Kolstad, who started writing screenplays after watching *Die Hard* on Beta when he was 13, and never really stopped, found his inspiration in some of his favourite film noir classics. "When I was a kid, I watched a lot of movies," he explains. "My favourites always had a revenge motive. And I love the antihero. So I wanted to explore what would happen if the worst man in existence found salvation. Would it be true to his core? When the source of his salvation is ripped from him, what

happens? Do the gates of Hades open?"



## Sucked back in by fate

And so began the extraordinary journey of John Wick, the only man ever to walk away from a shadowy world of elite professional killers and survive, only to be sucked back in by fate. John's the kind of guy who walks into a room and has everything laid out in his mind like a chess game," says Kolstad. "In the underworld, he's a legend, and he's been away long enough that the young up-and-comers have heard the name, but don't necessarily believe all the stories."

After a prolonged absence from Hollywood, Reeves' return in John Wick marks an exciting emotional transition for the actor that the filmmakers underscore with signature visual elements.

Reeves was already confident the duo had the skill and creativity to stage John Wick's ground-breaking action sequences better than anyone else. "Hearing Chad speak about the material and how he thought he could visually bring it to life was revelatory," Reeves says. "He and Dave were interested in making each character unforgettable. They had given thought to the themes of the movie, the double life, the hyper-reality. They've been closely following the film since day one and trying to bring out all the emotion that is in this piece."

As a filmmaking team, Stahelski and Leitch were the ideal choice for John Wick, according to Reeves. "Chad and Dave are experts in terms of this genre," the actor notes. "The dialogue is hard boiled, but it's also got the humour of graphic novels, the kind of amazingly original imagery and framing that we've come to associate with them. It's a unique vision. I thought it was exciting and really cool to see all of these influences and experience and craft come together."

## Action in terms of narrative

One of Stahelski's strengths as a fight choreographer and second-unit director has always been the ability to tell a story through action, says Reeves. "He always thinks about action in terms of narrative. He knows how to storyboard and pre-visualise the choreography; he has a lot of experience with the camera and with production issues. It's clear that this is what he and Dave should be doing right now."

Although Stahelski has worked with Reeves for more than a dozen years, this is their closest collaboration ever. "Keanu was very hands on," says the director. "He's one of the hardest-working men we've ever come across. He knows everyone's job. He can turn on a camera, he can shoot, he can edit, and he knows writing, character, directing and, obviously, performing. He's always the first on set and the last to leave."

Looking back on the experience of directing John Wick, director Stahelski says: "Making a movie is actually fairly easy. Making a good one is much harder. It was a huge learning experience and I'm very proud of it. We stretched our schedule to the absolute limits. We fought for what we believed in, and chose to make a story-driven, character-driven action movie. That's why I chose to do it. This was an opportunity to do something that wasn't just about cars, explosions, fire and fights. Yes, John fights; yes, he shoots guns; and he drives a car very fast, but the focus was always trying to do something cinematically different."

Audiences expecting to see a standard-issue action film will be surprised by the authentic emotional response they have to John Wick, says producer Basil Iwanyk. "Keanu is so urgent and so passionate in his role. His emotion feeds into the velocity of the storytelling. Not a lot of action movies can communicate the kind of journey John goes through as he tries to heal the wounds he has suffered. That's what I'm most proud of about the movie, and what I think people will really connect with."

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## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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