

# THE *Hollywood* REPORTER

NOVEMBER 1, 2022 | DAY 1 | AFM

AFM  
WEATHER  
AND HIGH  
TEMPS

TODAY  
66° F  
19° C

TOMORROW  
66° F  
19° C

## Van Damme Jumps Into *Darkness of Man*

BY ALEX RITMAN

**J**ean-Claude Van Damme is set to flex his more dramatic muscles in the upcoming neo-noir action film *Darkness of Man*.

The film — being introduced to buyers at the American Film Market by VMI Worldwide — comes from director **James Cullen Bressack** and has been likened to the grittier titles on Van Damme's impressive résumé, such films as *JCVD* and *The Bouncer*.

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Jean-Claude  
Van Damme

## Duchovny Boards *Adam the First*

**C**alifornication and *The X-Files* star **David Duchovny** will star alongside **Oakes Fegley** (*The Fabelmans*) and **T.R. Knight** (*Grey's Anatomy*) in **Irving Franco's** *Adam the First*, which Archstone Entertainment will be introducing to buyers at the American Film Market.

Franco (*Cheerleader*) wrote the  
(Continued on page 2)



EXCLUSIVE  
FIRST LOOK

## Saoirse Ronan in *The Outrun*

Ronan goes green in this first-look still from *The Outrun*, in which she plays a recovering alcoholic fresh out of rehab. From director Nora Fingscheidt and adapted from Amy Liptrot's best-selling memoir, the film is being handled by Protagonist Pictures, with CAA Media Finance co-repping North American sales.

## Struggling Indies Look to AFM for a Post-COVID Recovery

While studio tentpoles thrive, market dealmakers fret as only a handful of domestic independent releases have broken through at the box office and globally the situation is even worse: 'There's no good news at all' **BY SCOTT ROXBOROUGH**

**A**s the independent movie world returns to Santa Monica for the 2022 American Film Market this week, it is with the air of a surgeon checking out a long-ailing patient. The cinema business, on life support for the past two years because of COVID-19 restrictions, is far from healthy.

Studio blockbusters — the *Top Guns*, *Minions* and superhero tentpoles of this world — have done great since theaters reopened, but the market for art house and indie films remains shaky.

Even big, star-driven projects with studio distribution — see FilmNation and

CAA's ensemble actioner *The 355* or **Roland Emmerich's** sci-fi disaster epic *Moonfall*, distributed by Universal and Lionsgate, respectively, disappointed at the box office. With the bright, shiny exception that is A24's *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which recently crossed \$100 million worldwide, indie success stories have been considerably more modest. They include Entertainment One's *Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris*, which pulled in \$10 million domestically and \$16 million worldwide; Norwegian dramedy *The Worst Person in the World* from MK2 (\$3 million

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For all the latest coverage of the American Film Market, go to **THR.COM/AFM**

## The Report

Behind the Headlines

### VAN DAMME

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No stranger to action stars, having worked with **Bruce Willis** (*Fortress*), **Mel Gibson** (*Hot Seat*), and **Steven Seagal** (*Beyond the Law*), Bressack co-wrote the script with **Alethea Cho** from an original story he devised alongside Van Damme. Bressack also produces with **Jarrett Furst**.

Set in Los Angeles, *Darkness of Man* sees the *Kickboxer*, *Bloodsport* and *Universal Soldier* legend play Russell Hatch, an Interpol operative who takes on the role of father figure to Jayden, the son of an informant killed in a routine raid gone wrong. Years later, Hatch finds himself protecting Jayden and his uncle from a group of merciless gangs in an all-out turf war. Turning into a fight to survive, Hatch will stop at

nothing to protect Jayden and fight anyone getting in his way, including supposed allies with hidden agendas and nefarious intents.

“James and I have been working together closely for a while now on *Darkness of Man*,” says Van Damme. “It’s our passion project.”

Adds Bressack: “I’m very excited to dive into the world of *Darkness of Man*. JC has been amazing to collaborate with on this project, and I appreciate the immense and immediate support from the team at VMI.”

The deal was negotiated by **Jessica Bennett**, COO productions and acquisitions for VMI, and Bressack.

“I’m thrilled to be partnering with James on *Darkness of Man*,” says Bennett. “Partnered with one of the most iconic actors of the time, this one will definitely be a market favorite.” **THR**



From top: *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, *Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris*

### STRUGGLING INDIES

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domestic and \$13 million worldwide); and **Ti West**’s *X* and *Pearl*, the back-to-back film and prequel horror releases that A24 dropped in March and September that have each grossed about \$10 million domestically.

Even more troubling news for producers and sales agents propping up their stands at the Loews hotel for AFM this year: the global market is worse. In Europe, only the U.K. and Spain have shown a strong box-office rebound post-COVID. France posted its worst September in 42 years, with a meager \$47 million in revenue and fewer than 7.5 million tickets sold, a 20 percent drop from last year and more than a third lower than pre-pandemic figures for 2019.

“There’s no good news at all,” says **Kim Heaok** of Japanese distributor Hark & Co., speaking on a panel at during the recent Busan International Film Festival. The market in Japan for art house films was declining even before the pandemic, Kim noted, but COVID fears had a devastating effect, with older audiences, still the biggest supporters of art house fare, wary of returning to cinemas.

Still, hope endures. Sellers point to Toronto, which saw some encouraging green shoots in the form of Focus Features’ \$30 million deal with Miramax and CAA Media Finance for **Alexander Payne**’s **Paul Giamatti**-starrer *The Holdovers* — signed after a buyers-only screening — and international presales for AGC Studios titles including **Richard Linklater**’s noir comedy *Hitman*, starring **Glen Powell**, and the true-life thriller *The Dating Game*, which **Anna Kendrick** will star in and helm in her directorial debut.

“What I’ll be looking for is something unique, something truly original,” says **Olivier Barbier**, head of acquisitions at French distributor MK2, which turned *Worst Person in the World* into a sleeper success. “If we want to bring our audience — the art house, independent audience — back to cinemas, we have to make theatergoing an event again. And that means giving people something they’ve never seen before. Trying to reproduce what has worked in the past would be the biggest mistake.” **THR**

### DUCHOVNY

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film, which follows Adam, who, after his foster parents are murdered, sets out on a cross-country adventure to track down a series of men who might be his estranged father, each one with a different life that could become his.

*Adam the First* is produced by **Nathan Marcus**, **Jonathan Rubenstein**, **Ari Daniel Pinchot** and **Bernie Stern**. Executive producers include Archstone’s **Scott Martin**, **Michael Slifkin** and **Jack Sheehan**.

“*Adam the First* is masterfully crafted and beautifully shot,” says Martin. “It is engaging from start to finish. Irving Franco did a great job, and we are proud to represent it.”

Adds Franco: “I am extremely



excited to be sharing *Adam the First* with the world. Archstone has shown great enthusiasm for the magic and adventure of our film, and we are thrilled about this partnership.”

The deal was negotiated by CAA Media Finance and Archstone’s Sheehan. Duchovny is repped by CAA, **Jimmy Miller** and **Tiffany Kuzon** at Mosaic. **THR**

## Meanwhile, in the Real World ...

→ The man accused of attacking **Nancy Pelosi**’s husband with a hammer told police he wanted to hold the Democratic leader hostage and “break her kneecaps” to show other members of Congress there were consequences for their actions, authorities said Monday.

→ In an emergency appeal filed Monday, former President **Donald Trump** has asked the Supreme Court to order at least a temporary hold on the Treasury Department turning over his tax returns to the Democratic-controlled House Ways and Means Committee.

→ The NBCUniversal-owned streaming platform Peacock announced a wide-ranging content deal with Hallmark Media on Monday, which includes streaming simulcasts of Hallmark’s linear channels, as well as a library of on-demand and next-day content.



# JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME ISN'T READY TO STOP FIGHTING

The action legend sits down with director James Cullen Bressack to discuss their upcoming passion project *Darkness of Man*, which they promise will display a side of the Muscles From Brussels that the world has never seen **BY ALEX RITMAN**

**O**f all the action heroes merrily kicking the asses of bad guys in the late '80s and early '90s, in terms of actual fighting prowess, few came close to Jean-Claude Van Damme, a karate and kickboxing champion who turned his phenomenal martial arts skills — including a particularly impressive spin-kick — into, for a while, back-to-back box office gold.

First propelled into the arena thanks to Cannon Films' 1988 hit *Bloodsport*, Van Damme quickly cemented his iconic status as the Muscles From Brussels thanks to 1989's iconic *Kickboxer*, then starred as warring twins in 1991's *Double Impact*, began a long-running onscreen feud with Dolph Lundgren in Roland Emmerich's sci-fi 1992 smash *Universal Soldier*, led John Woo's U.S. debut *Hard Target* in 1993 and donned Guile's

beret in 1994's *Street Fighter* video game adaptation. Like many ripped stars of the time, however, the hits eventually dried up and so began a period of mostly straight-to-DVD releases. But out of nowhere, Van Damme suddenly showed another side to himself in 2008's gritty, self-reflective and personal



Bressack

JCVD, then began mixing things up, starring in comedies, voicing kids animations (*Kung Fu Panda* and, most recently, *Minions: The Rise of Gru*) and joined his former cohorts for *The Expendables*, all the while keeping the action going.

Now, at the age of 62, JCVD is set to keep the action going again in *Darkness of Man*, his latest project being introduced at the American Film Market by VMI Worldwide. From director James Cullen Bressack — a prolific young filmmaker whose list of action films includes *Beyond the Law* (starring Steven Seagal), *The*

*Fortress* (starring Bruce Willis) and *Hot Seat* (starring Mel Gibson) — and based on an original story he devised with Van Damme, the film, to be set and shot in Los Angeles, looks poised to show yet another side to the star.

Speaking to *The Hollywood Reporter* from Thailand (where he owns a Muay Thai kickboxing ring) via Zoom, Van Damme — alongside his director Bressack — describes the “brutal” nature of the violence in *Darkness of Man* (he's going to get an absolute kicking, apparently), says that, despite reports, his final action film might be some way off, explains why he's looking forward to shooting in L.A. (clue: It's his dogs), and reveals why you shouldn't be alarmed if you see him stretching in an elevator.

**How does *Darkness of Man* differ from your other films?**

**JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME** We've actually been



working on the ideas for this for almost two years, and it feels much different and darker. In the film, I've got to fight out of passion, I've got to fight out of friendship and I'm also out of shape. My character has been drinking, he's got a problem ... he's lost somebody. He's in a very dark place. My character is going to be more honest than me in real life.

**JAMES CULLEN BRESSACK** This is like a neo-noir film in many respects. His character has witnessed the murder of a person he loved and he's basically taking care of their child. He ends up spiraling out of control and, instead of being this polished martial artist, becomes someone fighting out of necessity, doing everything he can to keep this kid alive. You're going to see J.C. take real damage in this movie, and you're going to see a side of J.C. that I don't think we've seen before. It's a very less polished version of him.

**J.C., I hate to ask this question, but how much of your own stunts can you still do? Can you still do the legendary spin-kick and the splits?**

**VAN DAMME** Yeah! I'm lucky — I think it's in my DNA. But I'm stretching three times a week. The most important thing in life is to stretch, because muscles can grow and disappear depending on the consistency of your routine. Stretching has to be consistent, and not even in a gym. You can do it anywhere, in the right stretchy way, although it's a little more strange to look at. In Hong Kong I live on the 75th floor and it takes about a minute to get up there. So in the elevator, I squat down and slowly come back to my maximum while stretching over the course of the minute. (*Van Damme squats and stretches to show the exercise.*) I'm stretching all the time, like a cat. So right now I'm doing very well. I'm also taking lots of good products — dried fruits and ribose — I'm like a pharmacy!

**BRESSACK** What's really great is that J.C. is planning on doing most of his own stunts and fights, so to keep the visceral and passionate nature of them we can do a lot of the stuff in real time.

**VAN DAMME** I'm doing all, except catching on fire and jumping from a building. Because the insurance will not allow that.

**You've described this movie as being like "Jean-Claude as you've never seen him before." I feel like this phrase has been used a lot previously. JCVD was obviously like we've never seen him before. Is it the action style that makes *Darkness of Man* unique?**

**BRESSACK** Of course, there's a lot of action in this movie. But this is really focused on a human level and rooted in emotion. And when I say it's going to be a neo-noir, it's very, very pulpy. This a very dramatic role for him, and a lot of the more dramatic roles he's done, like [2018's] *The Bouncer* and *JCVD*, were in the French language. So we're looking at

doing this in English. It really is going to be a very different version of J.C. than you've seen before.

**VAN DAMME** And the fighting, it's going to be brutal!

**BRESSACK** What's also very exciting is that we're shooting in L.A., which has a very distinct look. And it's great to bring J.C. back to where his roots are and he hasn't done a film in L.A. in a very long time.

**VAN DAMME** Yeah, I'm going to be close to my family and close to my ... so many dogs. [Van Damme introduces his pet dog onscreen.] It's so nice to be at your own house. I've been living in hotels for 20 years.

**How did the two of you start working together?**

**VAN DAMME** We met in a sauna!

**BRESSACK** He did a spinning kick! No, actually I wrote him some fan mail and his team got



From top: Van Damme in his 1989 breakout *Kickboxer*; with Dolph Lundgren and Tiny Lister in 1992's *Universal Soldier*.



back to me. This was about four years ago and I just said I'm a huge fan and would love to work with J.C. And that's how it all began.

**I actually watched *Kickboxer* in preparation for this interview. It still holds up!**

**VAN DAMME** You know, a lot of people tell me that those movies haven't aged. Maybe I know why. It's about sincerity. If you're sincere in your role and believe in your part, that — plus all the martial arts — helps the audience ignore the poor background.

**Jean-Claude, you've worked with a lot of filmmakers. What do you look for in your directors?**

**VAN DAMME** When you look at the UFC [Ultimate Fighting Championship], most of the time the fighter wants to win for his trainer, who has dedicated months. When you do a movie with a director, you go to war — a healthy, artistic

war. You try to make them look good. So for me, if my director wins an award, I'm as happy as me winning an award, 1,000 percent.

**What do you think of the younger generation of action stars? Is there a worthy successor?**

**VAN DAMME** I'm actually quite shy and I'm not sure about the term legend. I'm just a normal guy, but the media can elevate you to a position where you look like a legend. So I'm trying to be as close to possible to that word legend. But regarding the younger generation, I was actually having a dinner with Bolo [Yeung] from *Enter the Dragon* and *Bloodsport*, and a TV crew showed up and asked, "Who's next after Van Damme?" And he said he didn't know. But one guy is out there, and he's going to pop out soon. It's a cycle. I don't know where he is, but I'm telling you he exists somewhere. And we're going to try to kill him!

**You've branched out away from pure action and into comedy, gritty drama, even kids' animation. Is action your comfort zone or are you happy to try other genres?**

**VAN DAMME** The first thing for me is the director. I need to meet the director and for them to tell me the story themselves. They need to put me in a headlock and walk around the block — a big block, three times — saying, "So that's when the women left you, and that's where you lost total control, and why" ... so I get the full story. I need to hear their truth, their imagination, and know that we like each other.

**Earlier this year, it was announced you were going to star in a film called *What's My Name?*, which was being described as your final action film. Is that project moving forward? Will it be your final action film?**

**VAN DAMME** I want to make one more big martial arts film. But I guess it's not the time right now. Before I believed in destiny, but now I believe in synchronicity. So if something doesn't go my way, then it's not supposed to go my way. So *What's My Name?* may happen, may not happen. And I have another project that's as good. But that's for later. Right now, I'm so into *Darkness of Man*, which was always working in parallel.

**Why do you think so many action stars from the '80s and '90s are still working today?**

**VAN DAMME** I know an actor who did so many movies. He's in his 70s and is still making movies, but still professional, and still wants to work and work. There's nothing wrong with that. Stallone told me on *The Expendables* that he'd like to die on set.

**You've got no plans to do that, have you?**

**VAN DAMME** When people ask me my age, I say I'm eternal.

*Interview has been edited for length and clarity.*