



DEATH THREATS,  
PUBLIC DISORDER AND  
DANCE LESSONS FROM DUVALL...

# FALLING DOWN

As riots enflamed LA, Joel Schumacher and Michael Douglas forged an incendiary modern tragedy charting one man's spectacular meltdown. Total Film tracks down the twisted firestarters...

WORDS **MATT GLASBY**

## GOING HOME

**EBBE ROE SMITH** (Scriptwriter) *Falling Down* began with an article about an incident on the LA freeway where a big-rig trucker began ramming other vehicles. I was fascinated with the instant when the driver snapped and the bounds of polite society fell away. He probably didn't set out that morning to do it. Something specific must have set him off and released a floodgate of built-up rage. His rampage became William 'D-Fens' Foster (Michael Douglas) abruptly leaving his car on the freeway. This was actually an imp-on-the-shoulder fantasy I'd had sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

**JOEL SCHUMACHER** (Director) Everyone's dreamed of leaving their car in the middle of rush hour, but if you actually do it, you're a very unpredictable character because, by leaving your car behind, it shows you're willing to abandon everything you've ever worked for. And each step along the way, D-Fens becomes more and more violent. It's a brutal and tragic tale of a man who makes one wrong decision after another; an unbalanced man pushed to the brink, who has within him the seeds of deeply disturbed behaviour.

**JON KLANE** (Smith's agent) It's a dark piece of business, alright. Someone at Paramount said, not only would they not make this film, but they hoped no one would, because it was socially irresponsible.

**ROE SMITH** I got a secret pleasure from that. When you're stirring people up, you're doing something right. I didn't set out to write a social commentary piece. I saw it as a cop drama with a twist. I was surprised by some >>

of the reactions to the film. I guess I was naïve. It all seemed obvious to me. My source was the morning paper. I wasn't making anything up.

**ARNOLD KOPELSON** (Producer) Take the Whammy Burger scene, where D-Fens goes to the restaurant and wants to be served breakfast, but he's three minutes late. That happened to me while I was shooting the movie. I missed breakfast at home and I rushed up to the counter and they said, "Well, you're too late, we're not serving breakfast any more." I actually got hysterical. The server asked, "Why are you laughing?" I said, "You just wouldn't understand..."

**DW MOFFETT** (Actor, 'Detective Lydecker') To this day it's one of the top five scripts I've ever read. When I finished it I was like, "Holy shit, a studio is going to make this movie? Are you fucking kidding me?"

**ROE SMITH** It was originally conceived as a smaller, darker piece. D-Fens was meaner, less sympathetic. For instance, I had him shoot the Whammy Burger manager right through his clipboard. But the basic story survived quite well. The golf scene was added. I think there was a feeling that we were beating up too much on the lower classes. Also, I never wanted Duvall's character to un-retire, and originally D-Fens lived at the end. I believe the bazooka scene was added, although construction sites were on my list of targets pretty early on. That's

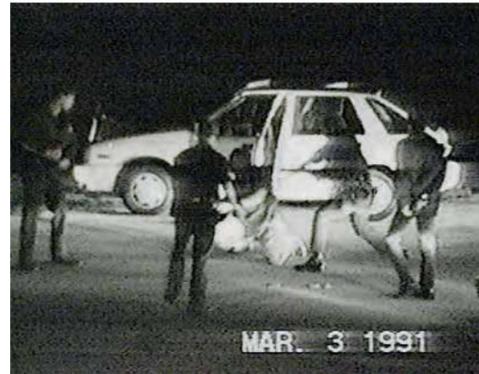
## CLOSE-UP

How the Rodney King trial lit the fuse of the LA riots...

### EXT. LA FREEWAY. NIGHT.

As a home video camera jerks into silent, monochromatic focus, we see Rodney Glen King, 35, African-American, handcuffed on the concrete as LAPD officers Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno and Sergeant Stacey Koon beat his face, legs and torso, their batons raised like baseball bats. After 50 seconds, King stops moving. Then an officer kicks him in the head and the frenzy of blows begins again. As the camera pulls back, we can make out a group of passive onlookers, all cops...

Although this could easily be a cut scene from Smith's script, it's real footage, shot by bystander George Holliday, on 3 March 1991. On his patrol car's computer, Koon observed, "I haven't beaten anyone this bad in a long time." Charged with using excessive force, the officers were acquitted (by a largely white jury) on 29 April 1992. Then all hell broke loose...



himself and can't handle it breaking down. He's a control freak losing control. He is truly baffled that he has become the "bad guy" at the end.

**MICHAEL DOUGLAS** (Actor, 'D-Fens') I thought D-Fens was fascinating. LA was the defence centre of the US and at the end of the Cold

until the hairdresser gave me that flat-top haircut. All of a sudden, putting on that white shirt – which was a little too tight – made me feel like I was busting out, like someone who was about to implode or explode. I couldn't decide which.

was a child-like quality that crept in; a delight in what he was doing that was very appealing.

**SCHUMACHER** People identify with D-Fens, but Michael and I were never in any doubt that he's the bad guy. We didn't have him feeding starving dogs or things a lot of Hollywood actors might have wanted. Michael never asked me for a moment in the film where people would love him.

**MOFFETT** He should have been nominated for an Oscar, it's his best performance.

### BOBBY ON THE BEAT

**SCHUMACHER** Both D-Fens and Detective Prendergast (Robert Duvall) are versions of the same man. They've both experienced loss, they both have dysfunctional marriages and they're both ordinary men who've had no glory in their lives. But Duvall bares it with a noble, quiet dignity.

**ROE SMITH** Duvall brought a normalness to the character that was perfect.

**TICOTIN** When you watch him, in all of his work, you never see the wheels turning, you never see the acting. He's always that person.

**MOFFETT** You get more from watching him than 50,000 acting classes. I remember he'd just discovered the tango, so between takes, he'd be tangoing around the police station showing us the moves. He basically became

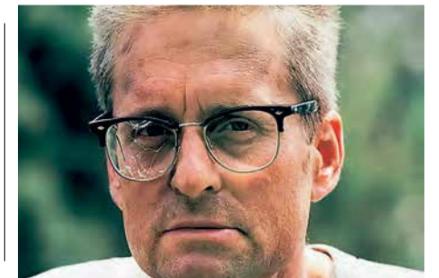


Running wild: Douglas goes mad on the streets of LA.

not really connected to anything else. It really made sense.

**DOUGLAS** There was a deep-seated anger in the black community as to how the police had betrayed them.

**KOPELSON** We were sorry we didn't have a camera, to incorporate footage of the riots into the film. Everything we were talking about was happening around us. The city had boiled over. It gave rise to a Newsweek story on white man's



## 'I'M THE BAD GUY? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?' WILLIAM 'D-FENS' FOSTER

probably the goofiest we got. But, come on, you're not done until you blow something up!

**SCHUMACHER** I thought I would be the luckiest person in the world if I got to direct this movie. The execs actually said that they didn't want me to do it because they thought I was too nice. I'm sure after they got to know me a little better they changed their point of view.

### ON D-FENS

**ROE SMITH** It was a treat to write the character of D-Fens. I think he just has a very rigid image of

War, employees like him were getting fired because they did such a good job!

**KOPELSON** Joel was going to Santa Barbara for the weekend. He said, "I'm going to knock on Michael Douglas' door, have him read the script." He came back on the Monday and said, "Michael's in." It didn't take great business acumen to say this is a package, at approximately \$25m, that we can't lose on.

**DOUGLAS** It was one of the fastest decisions I've ever made in my life. I was still kind of bouncing around what I wanted to do right up

**RACHEL TICOTIN** (Actress, 'Detective Torres') The minute I saw the crew cut, I thought, "Oh, that's perfect!"

**SCHUMACHER** Michael had just finished shooting *Basic Instinct* and there was a threat against his life. The FBI came to see us and said there was a bounty out on him.

**DOUGLAS** It was a gay militant group who took issue with a lesbian being the murderer. They were very vocal while we were shooting. Afterwards, there was a death threat; they said that somebody was going to do something while I was presenting at the Academy Awards. There was an air of concern, but you take the proper precautions and get on with it. I felt a little strange going to the john with an FBI agent in the next urinal! I got to know a lot about police procedure.

**SCHUMACHER** Because we were shooting on the mean streets of LA, we kept him far from the set. Of course, having a famous movie star father, Michael grew up on sets, but the character he's playing is very disenfranchised and cut off from society, so we kept him in his trailer, with bodyguards and security.

**DOUGLAS** It worked out fine. Most of D-Fens' whole process was not about familiarity, it was about experiencing things for the first time. Joel's a very brave director; he doesn't do a lot of coverage. It's kind of first take, that's fine.

**ROE SMITH** Douglas brought a charisma to the role that opened the character up to the audience, brought them into his world. There



On the chase: Robert Duvall as Detective Martin Prendergast on the trail of D-Fens.

## 'YOU'RE MAD BECAUSE YOU GOT LIED TO? THEY LIE TO EVERYONE!' PRENDERGAST

a tango-holic [see 2002's *Assassination Tango*], and I met him early in his addiction.

**SCHUMACHER** Duvall and Rachel Ticotin had a great old time dancing the tango, but I was nervous about directing him, because he's worked with some of the greatest directors. I remember the first day, I was sitting in my chair a little intimidated, then I thought, "You know what? He chose to work with you, you're the director, do your job, Joel." So I got up out of my chair and gave him an instruction and he said, "Thank you." I remember thinking to myself, "I JUST DIRECTED ROBERT FUCKING DUVAL!"

**MOFFETT** Duvall's cool as a cucumber. He did great.

### CITY ON FIRE

**SCHUMACHER** LA was a powder keg, with a lot of tension and unresolved issues. There was a lot of anger towards George Bush Snr, a lot of people were losing their jobs, there were big racial problems, the Rodney King trial was going on [see 'Close Up' box] and, in the middle of shooting, the riots started. I think that Ebbe, because he was an actor and because it was his first script, his pores were open and as an artist he absorbed what was going on.

**TICOTIN** LA is a very segregated city. I wasn't surprised. I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often to be honest. In LA people live in groups; this colour's in this group, this colour's in that group. They're very estranged from each other,

paranoia and I shot the cover: Michael Douglas in a cracked pair of glasses.

**SCHUMACHER** When you shoot in any city you have these wonderful senior cops as advisors, because it's relatively pleasant dealing with the criminals of Hollywood as opposed to real criminals. But they told us that if the Rodney King verdict went down the wrong way there was going to be blood in the streets. The day of the verdict we were supposed to be in Inglewood shooting the Whammy Burger scene, which would have put us in the heart of the riot. The studio insisted we shut down and sent us all home. I remember turning on the TV... I'd never seen anything like it. The city was on fire.

**ROE SMITH** Shooting was shut down under the Force majeure clause [when an extreme event prevents either party from fulfilling a contract], which was unusual. The irony certainly wasn't lost on us. My most vivid memory is of the smell of burning tar hanging over everything. It was bizarre. Suddenly a city you felt secure in, wasn't. It was like being teleported to a war zone.

**MOFFETT** I was driving west on the morning of the verdict and the traffic stopped dead and I started to smell smoke. I felt the hair go up on the back of my neck and I thought, "Oh my God..."

**DOUGLAS** It was surreal – the haunting sense of having your finger on the pulse, but just a little too close. Selfishly, it was sort of a confirmation of why we were so excited about the picture in the first place. Quite honestly, I made my choice and got out of there. >>





Gun squad: Douglas and Duvall shoot it out.



**MOFFETT** I was at the front desk of my building with sandbags, a case of shotgun shells and two 12-gauge shotguns pointed at the front door, which had been boarded up. They were burning buildings up the street and no one knew whether they going to stop at stealing colour TVs or go for scalps. We just waited it out for a couple of days and then it blew over, kind of...

### THE BAD GUY

**DOUGLAS** I think people identified with it because it was the truth. It was a tough look at our society, so it was a great picture to promote abroad – the foreign countries loved it. It was a reaffirmation of the stereotype of how violent American culture was.

**TICOTIN** It's gets short shrift sometimes, but it

really is a wonderful film from a time that had so little perfection in it.

**SCHUMACHER** The film certainly split people. Half the critics thought it was genius; the other half thought we should be killed. It raised very strong emotions in people, which, of course, was its purpose. It was created with the full knowledge that it was going to cause trouble and controversy. I think the people who protest the loudest against *Falling Down* do it because it triggers something in them.

**DOUGLAS** Well, the National Korean American Grocers Association (NKAGA) wasn't happy [an early scene shows D-Fens exercising his "rights as a consumer" against Korean shopkeeper Mr Lee (Paul Michael Chan) – with a baseball bat]. They came to Warner Bros en masse and said they found it very offensive. I had a good conversation with them, I said, "Let's calm down. There is no racial reason at all why the screenwriter chose this scene, this situation. And, you know, with all due respect, you guys freaked out, but people see this scene, they smile and they understand what's going on." Soon after that the NKAGA created this 'Smile' badge which they put in their grocery stores, in order to change the style in which they dealt with customers.

**ROE SMITH** I had a real uncomfortable radio interview with some representatives of the Korean-American community who were quite upset. The film was actually banned in South Korea for a while.

## 'YEAH, WELL... THAT'S NOT OUR POLICY.' RICK, WHAMMY BURGER MANAGER

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT...



#### LA ON FILM

The sleazy underbelly of LA continues to inspire its indigenous scribes, most notably in *Dark Blue*, *Waist Deep*, *LA Confidential* and *Training Day*, the latter irresistibly recalling Ebbe Roe Smith's picaresque urban nightmares.



#### JOEL SCHUMACHER

After suffocating the pre-Nolan Batman franchise with high camp, Schumacher discovered two things for 2000's *Tigerland*: 1) Colin Farrell and 2) understatement. The former rejoined him for 2002's solid *Phonebooth*. Sadly, as evidenced by 2007's *The Number 23*, the latter has yet to.



#### MICHAEL DOUGLAS

Amid a millennial hat trick of critical hits – *The Game*, *Wonder Boys* and *Traffic* – Douglas married Catherine Zeta Jones, cementing his place as Hollywood royalty, despite a newfound penchant for family froth such as *The In-Laws* and *You, Me and Dupree*.



#### ROBERT DUVALL

Old twinkle toes scored his fifth Oscar nomination for 1997's *The Apostle* and continues to show the Hollywood young 'uns how it's done in, lending his grace and genial gravitas to superior fare such as 2007's *We Own The Night*.



#### THE LA RIOTS

The six-day rampage left 53 people dead. Two of the officers (Powell and Koon) originally found innocent of the Rodney King beating were declared guilty at a federal retrial. Chief of Police Willie Williams left the LAPD. King has since been arrested 11 times.

**KOPELSON** I was doing press for another movie in Korea and there was a room full of people with TV cameras. The first question was, "Mr Kopelson, what do you have against Korea?"

**ROE SMITH** The defence industry complained that we were trashing defence workers and saying they were basically nutcases. That made me laugh.

**MOFFETT** We screened the movie at my theatre company in Chicago as a benefit and people were whooping and hollering when D-Fens was taking it out on the gang-bangers. Americans are so afraid of speaking the truth about race: "Oh there's no racism, everything's going to be OK..." That's bullshit. The movie cleverly embraced our own rage, I really liked it for its lack of political correctness. It's cathartic when people speak the unspeakable and go: "Fuck those guys, fuck those punks, the motherfuckers!"

**DOUGLAS** It's a nice feeling that you're onto something; that you hit the button. It's the joy of flying without a net and knowing that you've completed the somersault.

**SCHUMACHER** After the film was over, a VIP at the studio asked me if I could do something to make it more "user-friendly" for audiences. I said, "Burn it. You had the balls to make it, so show it or burn it, but there's nothing else you can do." 

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