



## FACT SHEET

Week Beginning 17 April 2006

### Media and Technology

#### Film Review - A History of Violence

When I picked up my ticket to see *A History of Violence* the guy at the box office said: "Give it five stars for Viggo".

He was referring to the star of the movie, Viggo Mortensen, who without any doubt is one of the brightest stars of the current movie firmament. Mortensen has that quality that compels you to watch him. He dominates the screen.

In the first of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy its about one third of the way into the movie before we encounter him as the mysterious character who shows up just in time to save the innocent Hobbits from the forces of evil. The first time we seen him, Mortensen's face is half obscured by the shadow of the hood which covers his head. But even half of his face is enough to intrigue us: the wide mouth with the upward twist at the end; the Kirk Douglas dimple in the chin and the huntsman's glint in the eye. We know immediately that there is a strength of purpose to this man. Where he goes we can expect action to follow. And, in *Lord of the Rings*, it certainly does.

And there's no shortage of action too in *A History of Violence*. You may have seen the trailer for this movie in which a pair of gun-toting thugs are shown attempting to rob the small-town cafe where Viggo Mortensen plays the character of Tom Stall the, apparently, mild-mannered owner of the cafe. The trailer reveals that there is another side to Tom Stall and we see him turn the tables on the bad guys beginning with some deft work with a pot of hot coffee and then following up with some lethal marksmanship using a gun taken from one of the thugs.

As the plot unfolds, Tom Stall, cafe owner turned Dirty Harry, attracts a lot of television news coverage and this publicity, in turn, has the effect of bringing even more bad guys into the formerly peaceful rural township of Millbrook.

The first two bad guys just happened by and it was their misfortune to bump into Tom Stall. However, the next car load of bad men – led by a very nasty gangster called Carl Fogarty – are much more threatening than the first two and, to make things more interesting, they come to town to seek out Tom Stall and confront him with accusations of a shady past life and the suggestion of a great deal of unfinished business.

The sinister Mr. Fogarty is played like a coiled snake ready to strike by the brilliant Ed Harris from behind the mask of a horribly disfigured face.

We begin to suspect that there's more to cafe owner Tom Stall than meets the eye. We know that he can take care of himself but we also know that, in many ways, he is very vulnerable: very exposed to these evil-looking potential predators from out of town. Tom lives in a lonely house on the outskirts of town with his wife, teenage son and young daughter and the police presence in Millbrook is limited to a kindly, middle-aged Sheriff.

The situation becomes even more complicated by disruption within the Stall household. Tom's wife, played with intelligence and passion by Maria Bello, is confused and resentful at the suggestion that Tom has a past about which she, it seems, knows nothing.

Tom also has a falling-out with his teenage son following an argument touched-off by a school bullying incident. The school bullying issue forms a well-designed sub-plot which contains its own lines of threat, tension and violence and forms a neat reflection of the development of the main story.

Now, a word to the listener. Don't be concerned that I have given away the plot of this intricately woven thriller. Some movie critics seem to take a perverse delight in telling you the whole plot of a movie. That's just lazy journalism and very irritating for those of us who like to get some element of surprise from seeing a movie.

So, trust me, giving the plot away is not my style. To this point, in discussing *A History of Violence*, I haven't told you much more than you would have seen in the trailer. There is a great deal more remaining to surprise you and get the heart pounding. It's a movie that cleverly infuses almost every sequence with a sense of threat. There is tension present right from the very beginning even though the opening images have about them an air of absolute normality.

On a sunny day, two men emerge from their room in a shabby motel and begin to walk to their car. One of them pauses to straighten the deckchair outside the door of the room. One of them says he will go to the office to check out. The other climbs into the car, lights a cigarette and starts the engine. It's just a slice of life. No music, just natural sound. And yet the tension is there as taut as a trigger finger. If you allow yourself to be drawn into this movie you'll be on the edge of your seat right there and then and you'll stay there for the rest of the picture.

*A History of Violence* was directed by David Cronenberg, who began his career as a horror movie director but, in more recent years, has directed movies with more weighty themes.

This movie is about bullying and the violence which can come crashing unexpectedly through the facade of normality in any community. Cronenberg cleverly underscores the day-to-day normality of the movie's settings by locating most of the sequences in real places rather than studio lots. Some of the exterior scenes for the town of Millbrook were actually shot in the town of Millbrook, Ontario in Canada.

There are no special effects. This is pared-down movie-making in the best traditions of Film Noir. Its impact derives from the writing, directing and performances. If you liked Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, Peter Weir's *Witness* – which, incidentally, included one of Viggo Mortensen's earliest movie roles – or Tom Cruise in *Collateral*, you will be enthralled by *A History of Violence*.

The guy at the box office said: "Give it five stars for Viggo". Well, Viggo Mortensen is certainly terrific in the role of Tom Stall but I don't give away five stars too often. However, I'd have no hesitation in giving *A History of Violence* four stars. It's a ripper!

John McGowan  
April 9, 2006