



Presents

DEAD MAN'S WIRE

A film by Gus Van Sant

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DEAD MAN'S WIRE

Director's Statement

I've always been drawn to understanding what drives people—what compels someone to cross a line, to act out of desperation, conviction, or fear. Dead Man's Wire is no exception.

The film is based on the true story of Tony Kiritsis, a man who, in 1977, felt deceived and cornered by the system he trusted most. Believing his mortgage company had exploited him at his most vulnerable, he took drastic and very public action to reclaim a sense of power and justice. His story is both deeply human and profoundly unsettling—an act of rage that became a cry to be heard.

In telling Tony's story, I wanted to resist the impulse to lead the audience toward a single interpretation or moral conclusion. Instead, I chose to observe—to let the situation unfold as it did in real life, without judgment or commentary. My hope was to create space for viewers to experience their own emotional responses, whether empathy, discomfort, confusion, or even laughter.

That laughter, too, is deliberate. Even in moments of chaos or despair, absurdity has a way of creeping in. Allowing humor to exist within unsettling circumstances felt essential—it reflects how people really experience crisis, and it reminds us that tragedy and comedy often occupy the same fragile space.

We began filming in November 2024, and as the world shifted around us, we found ourselves confronting echoes of Tony's experience in today's headlines—stories of economic strain, mistrust, and the fraying social contract. These parallels made the project feel eerily timely, and at times, uncomfortably close.

My hope is that the film doesn't merely revisit a moment in history, but opens a conversation about how frustration, alienation, and loss of control can twist into something volatile. While the subject matter may be disturbing, it reflects the uncertainty, anger, and—sometimes—the strange, human humor that continues to shape our collective experience.

I am profoundly grateful to the real people whose lives informed this story, and to the extraordinary cast and collaborators who brought it to life with honesty and empathy.

~ Gus Van Sant

DEAD MAN'S WIRE

Production Notes

With *Dead Man's Wire*, Gus Van Sant transforms an infamous true-crime tale of the 70s into both a wildly entertaining spectacle and a razor-sharp look at what happens when spectacle is all you've got. The film immerses the audience in the black-comic frenzy of an unhinged hostage taking. But just beneath the thriller's frantic tension lies a darkly funny, deeply human excavation of American myth-making—as an aggrieved Everyman, an indifferent system, a media expanding its power, and a rising current of outrage at life being stacked against the little guy converge into an eerily familiar circus onto which everyone projects their own meanings.

The film marks Van Sant's first feature in seven years. But as he has done in such touchstone movies as *Drugstore Cowboy*, *To Die For*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Milk*, and *Elephant*, he taps into themes that are immediately resonant in American culture. Mirroring a standoff that was entirely broadcast live, Van Sant uses a style as direct and reverberating as a gut-punch, purposely designing a run-and gun production taking just 19 days to shoot an event that unfolded over an incredible 63 hours. Says Van Sant with his distinctive economy of words, "I am always drawn to what makes people do what they do, and here I was interested in Tony Kiritsis's misguided sense of heroism."

Sparking that approach was first-time screenwriter Austin Kolodney's lean yet wide-ranging screenplay. Steeped in a comedy-writing background, but with the soul of a cinephile, Kolodney had done something unexpected: disarmed the story's pure sensationalism by leaning into all that raged just below its surface, into a tangle of roiling human emotions, unresolved furies, simmering class divisions, and blurred lines between grabbing attention and getting true justice. He keyed into the inky-black absurdity of a man whose deluded quest to be heard collided head-on with a new age of infotainment.

Unusually, the two-time Oscar-nominated Van Sant developed the script with Kolodney while the struggling young writer worked as a janitor squeegeeing gorilla and orangutan enclosures at the LA Zoo. Kolodney's free-wheeling writing, and its match with Van Sant's penchant for outsiders and outlaws, soon lured an inspired cast including Bill Skarsgård, Dacre Montgomery, Colman Domingo, rising star Myha'la, and legendary Al Pacino. Always meticulous with atmosphere, Van Sant crafted the film's grit and urgency with a team led by cinematographer Arnaud Potier, production designer Stefan Dechant, costume designer Peggy Schnitzer, editor Saar Klein, and composer Danny Elfman.

From the opening moments, an unblinking, handheld camera latches onto the manic energy of Skarsgård's Tony—and stays with him through every second of ratcheting pressure, epic rants, and sardonic twists as he rides the line between righteous defiance and abject madness. If the film is rigorously period, it also taps into an of-the-moment mood of anxiety in the face of goliath power structures. Both the immediacy and the resonance, says Van Sant, were a result of "bringing these three days in 1977 to life minute-by-minute, item-by-item, line-by-line with our cast and crew."

Sums up Domingo, “*Dead Man’s Wire* marks the thrilling return of Gus Van Sant to auteur filmmaking. He has created a world that is exciting to experience but will undoubtedly spur multiple perspectives and meaningful conversations.”

The Kidnapping

On February 8, 1977, would-be Indianapolis businessman Tony Kiritsis walked into the offices of Meridian Mortgage prepared to seek his own diabolical means of justice. Believing he had been screwed over on his loans, Tony blamed company owner M.L. Hall for severing his hoped-for path to the American Dream. His appointment that day with Hall’s son Richard was merely a feint for a bizarrely-conceived kidnapping scheme. Once they met, Tony forced Richard into a home-made, “fail-deadly” device later dubbed a dead man’s wire—a noose wrapped around Richard’s neck connected to Tony, then to a sawed-off shotgun designed to instantly go off should sharpshooters try to intervene.

From that moment on, there was no turning back, as Tony’s very bad idea kept building on itself, generating a media frenzy that, just as Tony had hope for, soon “went national.” With the city unwilling to risk disaster, and the public at once repelled and mesmerized by images of Richard in his pinstriped shirt-sleeves reckoning with a rifle bound to his neck, Tony was able to bring Richard to his apartment without interference. There the two holed-up together for three nerve-wracking days of extreme psychological intensity as Tony demanded \$5 million, immunity from prosecution, and, most importantly, a public apology from Meridian for making it so hard for people like himself to get ahead.

Madcap as it was, the incident seemed to presage all at once the modern media free-for-all, the growing power differential between haves and have-nots, and an era of lone wolf crusaders set off by hazy fury at uncaring systems. Today, the standoff is still taught in media ethics courses as a case study on the dangers of journalists escalating incendiary events.

In the end, while the kidnapping spurred fear, turmoil, and psychic damage, not a single shot was fired. That relatively upbeat outcome is what got Kolodney intrigued. “I wouldn’t have written this if it had come out any other way,” he explains. “It’s a testament to the idea that cooler heads can sometimes prevail. But also, I always thought the story was not so much about Tony’s terrible plan as about how everyone around him reacted to it. And because the real incident ended with the amazing punchline of Tony being found not guilty that really seemed to open it up into dark comedy territory.”

For Kolodney, the script would soon prove a galvanic life-changer. He was in fairly dire economic straits before and during its development—to the point he sought out an LA job fair where he landed the gig sweeping up at the zoo.

He saw none of that coming when he first bumped into the little-known reality of Kiritsis’ story whilst scrolling YouTube during the long nights of the 2020 lockdowns. Footage of Tony’s brazen scheme struck a nerve. Then it led straight down a rabbit hole. “Amid the strange confinement of that year and the questions of how I was going to pay rent, suddenly I see this clip of Tony marching down the street, slipping on the ice and nearly setting off his device, and the sheer pandemonium completely hooked me,” Kolodney recalls.

“That led me to watching the press conference where Tony is sipping water like a baby bird, cracking bad jokes, and talking about how the mortgage company stacked the deck against him,” Kolodney continues. “It was all terrifically cinematic, but it also hit home in a personal way. I was in elementary school when the 2008 financial crisis hit, and I think since then, the American Dream has felt distant for many in my generation. I didn’t want to lionize Tony or downplay the terror he caused, but it seemed notable that the itch Tony felt in 1977 still was striking a chord in 2020.”

As Kolodney plunged into research, he became aware many of those involved in the incident had already passed, including Kiritsis himself and both M.L. and Richard Hall. He also discovered the 2018 documentary *Dead Man’s Line* made by Alan Berry and Mark Enochs, whom he soon contacted. Though Kolodney’s inspiration came well before that, he credits Berry and Enochs with sending him a 16gb drive containing a veritable treasure trove of news clippings and original police reports.

Authenticity mattered, but Kolodney wasn’t interested in a mere procedural. His background writing for *Funny Or Die* and Comedy Central encouraged him to filter Tony’s cockamamie plot through an absurdist lens, fully entering the not-quite-right mind of a guy ready to go off the deep end just for the chance to say his piece—and the media eco-system that turned him into an underdog folk hero for doing so.

“I’m a goddamn national hero and don’t you forget it,” Tony informs the news crews chasing him. Yet his aims and his methods are a comical mismatch and Kolodney leaned into that humor. Even as he gains a fan club, the joke is ultimately on Tony because, while lives and careers might be forever altered by his crime, no real change can come of it. Kolodney suggests the public rooting for Tony may be as quixotic as he is and reflects affinities embedded in our national character.

“One thing I think this story does right now is open up a dialogue about who we are and who we want to be,” says Kolodney. “I loved Gus’s approach of including the clip of John Wayne and the Western iconography, because it’s a reminder that we are a nation that was founded on myths of loud, brash, boisterous outlaws.” (Remarkably, broadcasters really did cut from Wayne’s speech accepting the award for Favorite Motion Picture Actor at the 1977 People’s Choice Awards straight to live coverage of Kiritsis, creating a true-life interplay of outlaw entertainment with news of the real thing).

The more he learned about the 63 hours of the standoff, the more Kolodney saw the jumpy, tenuous personal dynamics between Tony and Richard as the beating emotional heart of the story. The claustrophobia and psychic terror of being wired to one another in Tony’s cramped apartment was palpable as he wrote through the isolation and hush of the pandemic.

Kolodney knew first-hand there would be natural class aversions between the two men. But he was also looking for flashes of unanticipated connection. “For me the soul of the movie was always what happens in the room between these two guys, which was largely drawn from my imagination,” says the writer. “I grew up with a single mom who worked in a grocery store, and to be honest, when I went to community college, I had a chip on my shoulder about people who come from wealth. So, I was attuned to how Tony might see Richard. But I also wanted to create empathy for who Richard is beyond his social status, and for this incredible ordeal Tony put him through.”

Though Tony and Richard might seem to share little but the strand of wire twitching between them, a parallel loneliness and doubts about mattering seem to eat at both. “I knew Tony had an abusive, violent father so I felt seeing Richard go through trauma with his own dad is something Tony could understand emotionally,” the writer says. “There is something so devastating about M.L. Hall refusing to apologize to Tony even with his son’s life on the line.”

Kolodney is the kind of devoted movie-lover who rarely lets a week go by without time spent in a theater. So naturally, he had in the back of his head Frank Pierson’s unflinchingly humane script for Sidney Lumet’s classic *Dog Day Afternoon*. That screenplay, too, was based on an actual 1970s crime—John Wojtowicz’s Brooklyn bank-heist turned explosive hostage situation. “I did want to pay tribute to Pierson and to the spirit of *Dog Day Afternoon*, but this is very much its own story,” he says.

Various iterations of the movie almost got off the ground, and for a time, after trekking 14 miles on foot from his Silver Lake apartment to Brentwood to meet with auteur Werner Herzog, he worked on a very different version. But when Van Sant came aboard, they went back to the unfiltered frantic energy of Kolodney’s initial draft. Kolodney was exhilarated by Van Sant’s vision. “This is a story that on the screen needed to be relentlessly tense but also very human yet also darkly funny—and Gus is great at balancing on that kind of tightrope. Tone-wise, I felt he knocked it out of the park, and it hearkens back to the brilliance of films like *To Die For*,” he comments.

While development proceeded, the zoo job kept Kolodney not just afloat but sanguine in the face of big changes ahead. “I’d see the sun rise with the animals and it was a monk-like spiritual existence,” he muses. “But the wild part was that on a Monday, I had my last day of work at the zoo and by Wednesday, I was in Louisville on the set of the movie I wrote.”

The Outsider Tales of Gus Van Sant

A cinematic chameleon, Gus Van Sant has explored nearly every mode of big-screen storytelling, from innovative microbudget indies to ambitious Hollywood blockbusters, from provocative formal experiments to heartfelt Oscar winners. But a singular, potent vein has shot through much of his work: a fascination with American outsiders and all that is revealed when observing life from the edges.

His first major feature *Mala Noche* announced the fully-formed arrival of a powerfully direct, if also lyrical, voice. Shot in black-and-white 16mm on the streets of Portland, Oregon, the film laid bare a hidden, vibrant world of transients, migrants, and convenience store workers living on the margins. With the two films that followed in his “Portland Trilogy” Van Sant would earn a reputation as a sharp poet of American street life. *Drugstore Cowboy* was a first of its kind, candidly and affectingly exposing the inner lives of young addicts in the Pacific Northwest. Then came *My Own Private Idaho*, which reimagined Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* as a love story between a princely mayor’s son and a narcoleptic hustler, and featured River Phoenix in one of his most magnetic performances.

As acclaim grew, Van Sant branched in new directions, adapting Tom Robbins’ counterculture novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Then came *To Die For*, which took him into satire for the first time

with unforgettable results, as the furiously comic takedown of fame showcased Nicole Kidman in a bravura performance as a small-town weatherwoman obsessed with being on TV. This was followed by the runaway box-office hit *Good Will Hunting*, the rousing tale of a working-class math genius, which garnered 7 Academy Award nominations including Best Picture, the coming-of-age story *Finding Forrester*, and an abstracted remake of Hitchcock's tale of outsider horror, *Psycho*.

His work in the early 2000s included a haunting foray into the off-limits subject matter of high school shootings in *Elephant*, which garnered the Cannes Film Festival's Palme D'Or, and a journey into the incendiary political history of *Milk*, which captured the watershed rise and tragic assassination of America's first openly gay man elected to public office, drawing 8 Oscar nominations. Following such films as *Promised Land* and *Sea of Trees*, in 2018 Van Sant directed *Don't Worry He Won't Get Far On Foot*, an unsentimental recounting of the late quadriplegic cartoonist John Callahan's recovery from alcoholism. For the last few years, however, he has explored television with the critically lauded *Capote Versus The Swans* about Truman Capote's complicated circle of female socialite friends.

Born in Louisville where *Dead Man's Wire* was shot, Van Sant's Midwestern affinity for the Everyman, especially the earnest, alienated Everyman, has perhaps never seen a more explosive rendering than in the story of Tony Kiritsis. The film came to him by happenstance, when producer Cassian Elwes presented him with a creative challenge. "Cassian said he had a project he thought I'd be good for, but we'd have to start shooting it in 2 months. I was in the mood to shoot a feature film, and the idea of trying to do it so quickly was exciting to me on its own," says Van Sant.

He continues, "Only after that, did I read Austin's script. He had written into it clickable links to original audio and visual content from the real incident in 1977. The first one I clicked on was Tony calling the police from the Meridian office as he's kidnapping Richard. Suddenly, I was looking at this real guy who was all at once so frantic yet so angry and yet constantly cracking silly jokes on live television. I thought this is an incredible character and the tone was unlike anything I'd seen before."

That sense of an irrepressible discontent breaking out into the culture is what Van Sant set out to capture, using the speed of the production to enhance the pressurized atmosphere of the film. With little time to prepare, Van Sant immediately leapt into what he knew would be one of the most essential elements: matching the characters to actors willing to dive with abandon into wholesale intensity.

The Captor and The Hostage

Throughout three sleepless days of a hair-trigger standoff with police, Tony Kiritsis somehow stayed turned up to 11, never wavering in his impassioned, grimly hilarious rants against an unfair system. For Van Sant, the search was on for an actor who could maintain the sustained agitation of a mind at once sharply focused and verging on total disarray while also opening a window into Kiritsis's humanity. He found that in Bill Skarsgård, who came in from day one with a head of steam and never left the state of maximal anxiety, even while shifting from scorchingly indignant to warm, sad, confused, jokey, and even sincerely idealistic in Tony's florid mania.

“I really just let Bill go,” says Van Sant of Skarsgård’s remarkable transformation. “Bill is a master of disguise, and he created a version of Tony that became the film’s guiding principle.”

Adds Domingo, “Bill is a dangerous actor, which is the very best kind. You always see a twinkle in his eye, and you never know what he’ll do next. He can go from rage to pain to comedy to devastating anguish in seconds.”

Tony was a character unlike any he’d previously explored. Skarsgård has become renown as a master of visceral terror in horror roles including the iconic Pennywise the Dancing Clown in the film adaptation of Stephen King’s *It*, *It Chapter Two* and TV series *It: Welcome To Derry*. as well as the titular *Nosferatu* in Robert Eggers’ remake, the scion of a vampire family in *Hemlock*, and a mysterious Air BnB guest in *Barbarian*. He has also been seen in such action films as *Deadpool 2*, *The Crow*, and *John Wick: Chapter Four*. But the jittery human tripwire that is Tony Kiritsis would take him far out of the supernatural and into a potentially real mix of human vulnerability and chaos.

Up against the film’s tight schedule, Skarsgård began working before production with a dialogue coach to nail the precise patterns of Tony’s harried drawl. He arrived in Louisville mere days before shooting began ready to go. “There was never a lot of time for us to talk about the character, but that worked out because we both wanted it to be raw,” says Van Sant. “When Bill came in, he had already developed that working-class Southern voice, which I found really interesting because we were able to play with it in different ways and using different volumes.”

Once filming kicked off, Skarsgård was often whipping through as many as 17 pages of the most heightened, volatile dialogue every day. But the shadings he brought were a revelation to all, including the film’s writer. “What Bill understood is that even though Tony is filled with unstoppable rage, there is also a feebleness to him and a frantic need to be liked,” observes Kolodney.

If Tony is all ranting, outward *id*, Richard Hall goes through a much more internal struggle, forced to bare his vulnerability and face his mortality before a mortified nation. The real Richard was said to have been severely traumatized by this psychologically devastating experience. Looking for an actor who could bring nuance to that desolation, Van Sant chose Dacre Montgomery, the Australian actor known for his popular role as the alternately charming and sinister Billy Hargrove in *Stranger Things*.

“I had seen this audition self-tape that Dacre did for *Stranger Things*, which has become kind of famous in the acting community,” explains Van Sant. “His range is incredible in it and that had stuck in my mind, so I immediately thought of him for Richard. I trusted in his abilities completely.”

Montgomery could not resist this first chance to work with Van Sant. “The script was an incredible piece of writing,” he says, “but also I felt inspired to give the best performance possible because I really wanted to see Gus’s vision of this story come together.”

He knew going in that the role would be hugely demanding on both body and mind—and not just because of the wire noose. “The whole thing was going to be this tricky dance between me and Bill,” he says, “being physically and psychologically tied to each other through 90 pages of dialogue.”

He continues, “It was interesting because Bill and I didn’t know each other beforehand and as actors, we work in completely different styles. But we share that we’re both very intense human beings, so that was the basis of our dynamic. It could have been just a chaotic explosion between us. But instead, it was this unusual symbiosis that is funny and strange and electric—and became as much an irreverent comedy as a tense drama. It turned into a great partnership. Bill really nurtured my ideas, and I tried to nurture his, and we got into a great two-step groove together. By the end of the shoot, I’d honestly never made a better friend with a castmate.”

Equally intriguing to Montgomery was the idea of Richard surprising audiences with who he really is beneath the corporate mask. “I greatly enjoyed that Richard is not who you expect at the outset. Not all children of awful, powerful people are equally as awful,” Montgomery notes.

Over their three days together Richard sees flashes of Tony that bely the violent madman threatening his life. “It’s not exactly a case of Stockholm Syndrome,” Montgomery reflects, referring to the psychological phenomenon of hostages feeling close to captors who hold power over their fates. “It’s more that Richard legitimately starts to feel compassion for Tony’s experience on the other side of the mortgage business. At the same time, he would do anything to get away from his gunpoint.”

Van Sant was impressed with the depth of Montgomery’s commitment. “At one point we offered to loosen the rig around his neck so it would be more comfortable, but Dacre said no, he wanted to feel it,” the director recalls.

Montgomery credits Van Sant with granting him the space to explore the shadowy psychological corners of a life-and-death experience. “Gus works like an alchemist, pulling together different elements to create something greater than the sum of its parts. I haven’t experienced a director putting so much faith in my performance before and it was incredible to collaborate like that.”

He describes the atmosphere Van Sant conjured on set as “flowing with energy and endorphins,” further amping the sky-high tension. Montgomery adds, “Gus also gave me and Bill the gift of shooting the entire apartment sequence chronologically which became key to us inhabiting the evolution of our characters.”

The icing on the cake for Montgomery was the opportunity to portray the son of Al Pacino’s enigmatic M.L. Hall. Invited to dinner by the American cinema icon before production, Montgomery recalls being a nervous wreck but, over the course of a deep, far-ranging conversation, he says Pacino became “like an old-soul friend and incredibly generous fellow actor.”

While Pacino’s appearance hints at the *Dog Day Afternoon* DNA at play in the film, his take on the imperious, cagy CEO indulging in a sunny Florida vacation while his son suffers on his behalf, took a thrillingly unpredictable direction. Van Sant notes, “Al had dinner with Bill in New York just before filming and Al told him right then, ‘I’m going to go big with it.’ By the time we shot his scenes, he had it all figured out. I’d seen him play Tennessee Williams in *God Looked Away* at the Pasadena Playhouse and he came in with a Southern accent that reminded me a little of that.”

Van Sant continues, “We shot his scenes in one day and it was a great experience. He was very professional and very, very cool.”

Comments Kolodney, “To have one of our greatest living actors take this role was beyond a dream, but even more so because Al is the North Star of *Dog Day Afternoon*. To be honest, I’m still processing the fact that it happened. People sometimes ask me, did you always have Al in mind, and I say, of course not, how could anyone have even thought that possible? But then, there he was, and it was incredible to write for his cadence and turns of phrases. He is minimal yet so powerful.”

Media and Police

Dead Man’s Wire is also very much a look at the rise of voyeuristic TV news and the increasingly mediated American experience of the world. In 1977, broadcast television was sitting on the cusp of massive changes. On the one hand, it was the Woodward and Bernstein era in which explosive investigative reports could suddenly turn journalists into overnight stars. But it was also just before the advent of CNN and the cranking up of the 24/7 news cycle. If the image of the nightly news remained a static anchor reading behind a desk, there was an inevitable sense this would not endure. So going live with such a wholly unpredictable, potentially deadly event presented the media involved with fresh logistical and moral questions—including how much they were using Tony’s violent outburst to garner ratings versus how much Tony was taking advantage of their coverage to carry out his crime.

To explore how the media reacted to Tony, and how it enveloped Tony’s illusory quest in a carnival atmosphere he began to relish, Kolodney created the character of young television reporter Linda Paige. Playing Linda is rising star Myha’la who came rocketing to the fore as Harper Stern in HBO’s *Industry* and with film roles in *Bodies Bodies Bodies* and *Leave The World Behind*.

“Linda represents the young newsperson who is not yet an on-air personality but senses an opportunity to be part of a larger story,” says Van Sant. “Visually I had in my head that she would have this spirit of style and grace and Myha’la had that.”

The role was an exciting one, as Myha’la notes that in 1977 a shockingly small number of black women broadcast journalists were seen on-air. Forerunners such as Indianapolis’s Barbara Boyd, San Francisco’s Belva Davis, Boston’s Sarah-Ann Shaw, and Nashville’s soon-to-be-world-famous Oprah Winfrey were slowly changing the picture. To match that pioneer attitude, Van Sant suggested Myha’la might weave elements of outspoken 1970s activist Angela Davis into the character, an idea she ran with. “It was a challenge and a real honor making my own version of that,” she says.

Kolodney describes Linda as “an amalgamation of a few different reporters I explored. I wanted this character to bring in a completely different perspective on Tony, to see him as having his own version of privilege. I saw Linda as being a savvy, cunning, ambitious reporter hunting for that one big story to change her life. But Myha’la and Gus found something even more special together.”

Watching the film’s skilled ensemble bring the uncorked situation so fully to life put Myha’la into a reporter’s watchful frame of mind. “It was easy to play someone witnessing a staggering event

because I felt I was doing the same thing,” she muses. “Linda is very much an observer, and I loved observing these incredible performances.”

She describes Van Sant as threading a needle, providing just the right amount of input. “Gus is a man of few words but the words he chooses are really good words,” she remarks. “He knows exactly what he wants, which makes for a very streamlined process as an actor. And because of all the respect for Gus, it felt like everyone came in at the very top of their game, which was very inspiring.”

Just as there was no cable news in 1977, the notion of globally connected social media was still little more than a sci-fi concept. But there was talk radio, which was very much the progenitor of a public commons for grievance sharing. Kolodney had not been surprised to learn that Tony felt an imagined bond with local Indianapolis radio personality Fred Heckman, who would unwittingly become a central facilitator of ending the standoff. Later, when Oscar-winner Colman Domingo joined the cast, Kolodney worked with him to fictionalize the character into the philosophical Fred Temple.

“I grew up listening to talk radio and I knew how these voices can feel like your friends,” Kolodney says. “I was interested in the parasocial relationship Tony struck up with Fred. And when Colman took the role, he and Gus went in a new direction that made it really exciting.”

Domingo was drawn to a story that “seems to mirror how people are feeling right now, how they are feeling they have no voice and they’re angry and want change, yet are powerless in going up against the system. Tony does something criminal and extreme, but he does see wrongs that need to be righted. That seemed really timely, and I felt had something to say about where we are today.”

As inspiration for Temple, Van Sant and Domingo looked at a few real-life DJs, including New York-based William Roscoe Mercer, aka “Rosko,” a rare black radio voice of the 60s and 70s who used the airwaves to weave together rock, pop, soul, poetry, and politics into a free-form flow made indelible by his force of personality. “I used to listen to Rosko when I was young,” explains Van Sant, “and he had a particular style where he’d read poems and then talk about the state of the world in this dreamy way, along with great music. I started sending Colman tapes of his show and he loved Rosko’s style.”

What Domingo discovered in Rosko was “a kind of voice-of-the-people and an advocate for the regular person, which I think is something Tony might have trusted in,” he says.

Having grown up in Philadelphia, Domingo also carried in the influence of another radio legend: Georgie Woods of WDAS, who not only helped promote many emerging black artists but also regularly stopped the music to talk about the civil rights movement. “Here was someone laid-back but with a resonant voice that was really in-tune with his fellow man,” he describes. “That’s what we had in mind for Fred Temple.”

Domingo notes that Fred is swept up in the Tony Kirihsis drama unintentionally. “He has no real interest in aiding a man in this extreme state, but he just gets caught up like everyone else,” he says. “At the same time, the urgency of the moment finally draws him out from behind the microphone and

into the streets to actually try to help someone. And I think Fred becomes the most grounded person in this whole wild storm surrounding Tony.”

Though Domingo and Skarsgård previously starred in Sam Levinson’s *Assassination Nation*, they had no scenes together. “But I was so very impressed with Bill’s work,” says Domingo. “We’re similar in the sense that we’re both leading men who are also rooted in being character actors, and in the way we both like to pull from a broad volume of resources, from both research and instinct.”

Instinct was given high value on Van Sant’s set. “Gus created the warmest, kindest, most creative environment,” comments Domingo. “He’d give you the gentlest notes. But he always knew exactly the feelings he wanted emotionally and visually and he kept that cinema verité grit going.”

Another calming force on Tony is Officer John Michael “Mike” Grable, the real-life plainclothes detective who was first on the scene in 1977, establishing a rapport with Tony and trying to talk him down. Taking the part is Cary Elwes, known for iconic roles in *Princess Bride* and *Robin Hood: Men In Tights* and in such prestige TV as *Stranger Things* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

Elwes dove into as much research as he could. “What was fascinating is that Mike had just taken a hostage negotiating seminar, so he was the best guy to try to reach out to Tony,” says Elwes. “And he ended up having a kind of profound if harrowing relationship with him.”

The real Grable had passed away but Elwes sought out his two sons, one of whom followed in his father’s footsteps to become a policeman. “The brothers shared some wonderful audio and visual material with me, and I was really blessed that they were so interested in being part of the process.”

On set, Elwes notes that everyone’s process was deepened by Van Sant. “Gus is a true artist who loves all art forms and has an extensive knowledge of film. As a director he seems easygoing and gentle, but at the same time he’s highly experimental and somehow pushes you to think entirely outside the box. Working with Gus, I don’t think I’ve stretched myself so much since acting school.”

Engaged With The Moment: The Production

If *Dead Man’s Wire* operates as a total immersion into mayhem, it does so through a tightly controlled structure and scrupulous layering of textures. Van Sant took full advantage of having just 19 days to forge the stripped-down focus and fleet-footed pace of a shoot that spurred maximal creativity for cast and crew in minimal time. He did so in Louisville, Kentucky, not only Van Sant’s birthplace but notably that of Hunter S. Thompson, whose groundbreaking *Gonzo Journalism* unleashed a torrent of manic first-person subjectivity that remade the media in the 60s and 70s. It is also a town that has visibly retained its mid-Century character.

Van Sant had a vision going in of saturated realism—somewhat influenced by sources such as Alan Pakula’s 1971 paranoid crime thriller *Klute* and the stereotype-busting colors of William Eggleston’s 1970s photography, which revealed an everyday small-town America glimmering with aquamarine busses, sunny yellow gas stations, and cherry red diners. But equally, Van Sant was aiming

at how news actually looked in 1977, then still often shot on 16mm film or with analog video cameras that were giving broadcast journalists greater powers to report live from previously inaccessible scenes.

The director further punctuated the action with sudden freeze-frames and recreated still photos that suggest folklore-in-the-making and a past that still exerts itself upon the present. “Throughout my filmmaking career, I’ve often mixed lots of different film resources, from flashbacks and home movies to news footage, to broaden reality,” Van Sant comments.

To craft the film’s visual language Van Sant worked closely with director of photography Arnaud Potier, with whom he’d previously shot a commercial. “I’d seen Arnaud’s work using thermal cameras on Harmony Korine’s *Aggro Drift* and I also liked the short film he did with Romain Gavras, *Neo Surf*, set in a futuristic Athens of sunken marble mines,” says Van Sant. “He’s very experimental.”

While Potier peered at DP Gordon Willis’s voyeuristic framing for *Klute* and at DP Henri Decae’s cool, muted hues in Jean-Pierre Melville’s French crime classic *Le Samourai*, Van Sant notes that “we didn’t look at too many references because I really wanted Arnaud’s own instincts to guide the image rather than to rely on anything seen before. We had general ideas. But we were trying to come in without a clear plan, because when you’re shooting a live event, you can’t have any plan.”

To keep every frame insistently in the moment, they avoided making shot lists, never did more than a handful of takes, and filmed 98% of the movie handheld with the digital Sony Venice and Sony FX3 cameras.

For the sequences that simulate archival footage, Potier researched news cameras used in 1977 which Van Sant describes as giving off “images with this very distinct milky green tone.” Ultimately, Potier was able to procure several vintage Ikegami portable broadcast cameras, the original three-tube color camera type that would be entirely replaced by much lighter-weight CCD (charged couple-device) cameras by the late 80s. Potier then used those Old School analog cameras to kinescope the production’s monitor, turning newly shot footage into something that looks straight out of the past.

All the department heads were united in aiming for a more vivid lifelikeness from an often dulled-down 70s period. “We all came in thinking of Eggleston independently,” recalls Van Sant. “People tend to think of the 70s in terms of those ugly, flat browns and mauves. But Eggleston’s photographs from the time are filled with bright reds, blues, and greens, and we wanted that feeling.”

Production designer Stefan Dechant, a recent Oscar nominee for his stunningly abstracted stage designs for Joel Coen’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, here set out to forge real spaces as crisply detailed as the characters living in them. With no time to spare, Dechant was able to efficiently craft nearly all the film’s sets in a single abandoned building: Louisville’s iconic Art Deco-style Courier Journal building, which had long been home to the lauded paper until it moved to new quarters in Fall of 2025.

Dechant used that one building to conjure such transporting locales as Tony’s stifling, low-down apartment, where much of the film takes place, as well as the gilded Meridian Mortgage offices and Fred Temple’s mood-lit radio station. Recollects Van Sant, “Stefan came in ready with a whole library of reference pictures including his own sketches and incredible full paintings of the sets. The

technical drawing of the dead man's wire that Tony lays out on the table at the start of the film was something that had been hand-drawn by Stefan. He felt it was important that you see how much and how deeply Tony had been thinking about this day."

Says Domingo of Dechant's sets, "Everything had that gritty rawness of 1977. All the details of the sets as well as the costumes, hair, and makeup just locked you right into the time."

Costume designer Schnitzer also played with brilliant colors in her character-driven outfits, dressing Skarsgård in a lime-green polo and coffee-brown slacks while Montgomery is nearly atonal in his tan trousers and white-striped banker's shirt. She went deeper into the period's fashion edge and glamour with Myha'la's boldly polished Linda Paige and the jazzy coolness of Domingo's Fred Temple with his turtlenecks and necklaces. "The clothes Peggy designed were amazing for the actors and she is really insightful and fun to work with," says Van Sant.

The just under three-week shoot took place in the deep Kentucky winter, lending an icy menace that overlays the story's sweat-inducing anxiousness. With temperatures hovering just above zero, cast and crew often worked in frigid cold, but that just added to the impulse to move fast and furiously. "It usually doesn't snow that much in Louisville," points out Van Sant, "but it just happened to happen to snow on our first day of shooting. It snowed a foot-and-a-half, and it somehow stayed on the ground for the whole three weeks."

Once the lightning-quick production wrapped, an equally intense editing period ensued, during which Van Sant collaborated with Saar Klein, a two-time Oscar nominee for *The Thin Red Line* and *Almost Famous*. Aiming for a seamless audience experience of snowballing intensity, it was all about rhythm with no room for anything superfluous.

"Saar tends to edit very fast, and he had the film together in one piece quite quickly," says Van Sant. "I've done plenty of films where it takes months of editing to get anywhere, but maybe the nature of the material put Saar in that fast-moving mindset. I worked with him a little more after that. But when we showed an early cut to our group, everyone's reactions were so strong, we felt there was a real-life energy we didn't want to make too tidy."

A good portion of the edit was spent making musical choices, with eclectic needle drops from the era underscoring every narrative turn. "Working with the music was a really good time for me," Van Sant admits, "because this was the musical period of my youth." Over a period of a month, he played with the placement of tracks spanning from such protest tunes as Roberta Flack's "Compared To What" and Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" to radio hits such as Yes's "I've Seen All Good People" and Deodato's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" as well as lesser-known cuts including Labi Siffre's "Cannock Chase" and Harpers Bizarre's cover of "Witchi Tai To."

Weaving through the soundtrack, Danny Elfman's brisk score heightens both the 70s mood and intensifying psychic dread. The two ended up sharing their mutual admiration for Jerry Goldsmith's 60s and 70s scores, especially the haunting, psychologically complex music he composed for John Frankenheimer's sci-fi cult classic *Seconds*. "Danny said he was very influenced by Jerry, so

we used that as a starting reference but then he took off and really made it his own,” Van Sant describes.

Mere months after production so abruptly started, *Dead Man’s Wire* was remarkably screening at the Venice Film Festival. There, it caused a sensation, heightened by the premiere coinciding with fast-breaking, tragic news stories no one anticipated. Yet the film’s mordantly funny conclusion, as Tony returns to the same disgruntled powerlessness that gave birth to the story, does signal a new era on the way—one that would keep sweeping us up in these hyper-charged, hyper-resonant moments it seems we can neither keep from happening nor look away from when they do.

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