



PRIME CUTS

MY FAVORITE NEO-NOIR  
TEQUILA SUNRISE

Vince Keenan

It's a confession to be made in hushed, almost embarrassed tones. "I'm a big fan of that Los Angeles noir film written by Robert Towne ... no, not that one. The *other* one."

*Tequila Sunrise* (1988) was a losing proposition from the start. No matter how successful on its own terms, it would be measured against *Chinatown* (1974). What film can live up to that? Its reputation was destined to be forever stunted, dwelling in its illustrious predecessor's shadow.



Master chef Robert Towne cooks up trouble with Mel Gibson on *Tequila Sunrise*'s restaurant set

And yet because of time and circumstance, *Sunrise* cast its shadow over me. At the time of its release I was a student, a punk kid who talked a good movie game but possessed only the most facile familiarity with cinema history. *Tequila Sunrise* bewitched me. I fell for its glossiness and its swagger, its bracing adulthood. It opened a channel to that motherlode of dark mid-century crime dramas that were beginning to exert their hold over me, telling me that these themes and emotions still had currency.

Watched now, *Tequila Sunrise* can seem like an overheated collection of 1980s artifacts: popped collars and smooth jazz, Perrier-swilling cops and hot tub sex scenes. But for me it remains a talisman, my personal gateway into film noir. We don't choose the things that influence us.

The basic storyline itself is a relic: boyhood pals on opposite sides of the law, in love with the same woman. Pure melodrama, but as Towne himself said, "I think melodrama is always a splendid occasion to entertain an audience and say things you want to say without rubbing their noses in it." The details are what matter, and Towne knows this warhorse of a plot is a sturdy frame for his thoughts on friendship and betrayal, Southern California-style.

Nick Frescia (Kurt Russell) is the newly-minted head of the L.A. County Sheriff's narcotics unit, chafing at his forced partnership with the D.E.A. Worse, their target is his old running buddy Dale 'Mac' McKussic (Mel Gibson). If Nick hadn't been riding the waves at Baja, he'd have been pinched for possession on the beach along with Mac and sent to stew in a Mexican prison. Mac became best friends with the mysterious trafficker Carlos. A reign as L.A.'s drug kingpin followed, but Mac – stop me if you've heard this one before – decides to go straight for the sake of his son. He now spends his days out

in Chula Vista hustling farm equipment, specifically a rubber hose designed for environmentally-friendly irrigation; the writer of *Chinatown* still has water on the brain. Nick's inclined to give his old pal the benefit of the doubt, but the D.E.A. hears Carlos has a massive deal in the works, one he'd never undertake without Mac's help.

This being Los Angeles, the investigation naturally centers on a restaurant. Mac takes his status as a regular at Vallenari's seriously, calling in the midst of a police pursuit to reschedule his reservation. Nick soon finds himself entranced by unflappable proprietor Jo Ann Vallenari (Michelle Pfeiffer) – when she works, he says, "it's kind of like you're in a play and everything's on cue" – while she slowly realizes Mac's steady business has nothing to do with the pasta.

Towne had Hall of Fame-worthy credits (*The Last Detail*, *Shampoo*) but burnished his Hollywood legend with films on which his name *didn't* appear. He was a script doctor *par excellence*, performing essential secret surgery on *Bonnie and Clyde* and conjuring Marlon Brando's death scene in *The Godfather* out of thin air. Even as *Tequila Sunrise* went into pre-production Towne was in Paris, lending an anonymous assist to Roman Polanski's troubled thriller *Frantic*. But he was in an awkward place personally and professionally. He had undergone an acrimonious and somewhat public divorce, and his squabbles with producer David Geffen on his 1982 directorial debut *Personal Best* became so heated Warner Bros. had to intervene. (To finish the film on his terms, Towne had to sacrifice the rights to long-gestating dream project *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes*. Towne used his dog's name as a pseudonym on the resulting film; naturally, the pooch wound up nominated for an Oscar.) Next, Towne tried to mount the *Chinatown* sequel *The Two Jakes* with Jack Nicholson reprising his turn as shamus Jake



Michelle Pfeiffer holding her own as the woman caught between two best friends

Gittes and former Paramount chieftain/ex-actor Robert Evans making a triumphant return to the silver screen as the other Jake. Towne ultimately fired Evans and the film collapsed, resuscitated in 1990 with Nicholson directing and Harvey Keitel co-starring. *Tequila Sunrise* represented a modestly-budgeted return to a genre Towne understood intuitively, set in the city he knew like no other.

Chief among the ways the film is a throw-back to its 1940s inspirations is its unabashed embrace of star power. In this love triangle all three sides have relatively equal weight, Towne banking on a trio of actors on the ascent. Mac proved the trickiest role, the studio concerned about casting a reformed drug dealer as a romantic lead. But the character clearly served as Towne's surrogate: "Anytime you're involved with legal matters, as I was with my divorce and *Personal Best*, you feel like a criminal, which made it particularly easy to identify with McKussic." (Critic Pauline Kael offered an additional comparison, citing "drug dealing as a metaphor for script doctoring, a lucrative sideline that his associates wanted him to mainline.") Gibson's career is now in tatters, but it must be said that few actors could match his combustible mix of menace and longing. *Tequila Sunrise*, slotted between the first two *Lethal Weapon* films, features one of Gibson's strongest performances.

Frescia was based on a San Pedro police officer Towne remembered from the 1950s as well as another unlikely acquaintance,

Los Angeles Lakers coach Pat Riley. Towne even took the unorthodox step of offering Riley the part, which a flattered Riley declined because "I was just starting out as a coach ... there's a certain decorum that a coach has to maintain." (Scoff if you must, but during Riley's broadcasting days he studied with character actor Jeff Corey at USC.) Kurt Russell adopted Riley's signature slicked-back hair, and a move where Frescia overturns an entire tray of drinks on his D.E.A. colleagues comes straight from Riley lore. The perennially underrated actor makes the character his own, preening with brio. Towne would later brand Pfeiffer "difficult," but the actress, at the height of her luminosity and amidst a run of acclaimed films like *Married to the Mob* and *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, was ideally suited to portray what Towne called "that kind of *sangfroid*, that kind of irritating beauty." Jo Ann is not only a competent professional but unlike her '40s forbears is able to sleep with both of her suitors without being judged.

*Sunrise* also boasts a bevy of juicy supporting roles that in decades past would have been played by the likes of Lorre, Greenstreet, and Elisha Cook Jr. J.T. Walsh brings a Shakespearean dimension to the plodding of his D.E.A. agent. Arliss Howard is solid as Mac's double-dealing layabout cousin. And Raul Julia, in a typically boisterous turn, single-handedly keeps the third act afloat as the Federale who has come north to capture Carlos.

Local boy Towne maximizes the value of the film's deglamorized

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A rare glimpse of J.T. Walsh's D.E.A. agent not butting heads with hotshot L.A. cop Kurt Russell

South Bay locations. As for Vallenari's, the restaurant was constructed in its entirety by production designer Richard Sylbert in a warehouse, and included a working bar and food prepared by one of the city's finest Italian chefs; production meetings were held about having sand dabs on the menu. (A case of art imitating life: for years Towne had been a staple at a similar Santa Monica eatery. The chef/owner's wife eventually left her husband and married the filmmaker.) Ten days into the shoot, cinematographer Jost Vacano (*Das Boot*) was fired and replaced by Conrad Hall. The new guy indicated he was in sync with Towne's vision when he told producer Thom Mount, "I'm gonna work from the drink," using the gold, orange, and red of the titular cocktail – made with tequila, O.J., and grenadine – as his palette. One of Hall's compositions almost obviates the need for the rest of the movie: Gibson and Russell in silhouette on a beachside swing set, feeling each other out as the sun boils into the Pacific. It's possibly the most California image ever, with everything Towne wants to say about friendship and the Golden State baked into it.

*Sunrise* met with mixed reviews. "You have to be able to enjoy trashy shamelessness to enjoy old Hollywood and to enjoy *Tequila Sunrise*," Pauline Kael wrote in *The New Yorker*, calling Towne "soaked in the perfume of 1930s and '40s romanticism" and dubbing Gibson's yearning dialogue to Pfeiffer "a line Gary Cooper might have spoken to Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco*." While Kael appreciated Towne's panache, she declared the film has "an emptiness at its center."

Sez you, Pauline. Admittedly, *Sunrise* is no neglected masterpiece. The ending devolves into the standard Hollywood morass of demolition and double-crosses. "You go to a great deal of trouble to explain an inconsequential event, Lieutenant," Nick is told by Raul Julia, and the movie occasionally suffers from similar logorrhea, as in this putdown from Jo Ann: "What's the matter, Nick? You need some Chapstick or some lip gloss or something? Because your lips keep

getting caught on your teeth. Or is that your idea of a smile?"

Other times, though, you're content to let Towne's characters talk, particularly on the film's core subject. Consider Arliss Howard's stoned epiphany ("Who says friendship lasts forever? ... maybe it just wears out like everything else. Like tires.") or Julia's late aria on the topic:

"Friendship is the only choice in life you can make that's yours. You can't choose your family ... No man should be judged for whatever way his dick goes! That's like blaming a compass for pointing north, for Christ's sake! Friendship is all we have! We choose each other! How could you fuck it up?"

The reaction to *Sunrise* is an argument that critics can make the worst critics, selective in bringing the weight of their experience to bear. On the one hand they carped about the threadbare nature of the friend-against-friend premise with several reviews citing 1934's similar *Manhattan Melodrama*, ignoring the fact that many in the audience (including yours truly) hadn't seen those earlier iterations and might thrill to a skillfully-told new version. On the other, they groused about the thorny plot, as intricate and as insubstantial as smoke rings, as if utterly unfamiliar with the unhinged narratives of antecedents like *Somewhere in the Night* or *The Unsuspected*. Some of these wags would have doubtless composed sternly-worded letters to Howard Hawks and Raymond Chandler, demanding clarifications in *The Big Sleep*.

Movies that, again, I might not have tumbled to had it not been for *Tequila Sunrise*. Like its namesake, it's a potent concoction that goes down easy. It has a keen sense of history coupled with an awareness of its own time. And it's a practitioner of an art already on the wane in the 1980s and almost entirely lost now. When Gibson and Russell square off for the final time, two sets of blue eyes boring into each other, you're reminded that not so long ago, they knew how to let stars be stars. ■