

I Didn't Want to Cast Danny Trejo (on rewriting for your cast)

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Blog Posts

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I didn't want to work with Danny Trejo. It's not because I didn't think he was a good actor or a great bad guy or genre-film famous. Because Danny Trejo is all of those things. The reason I didn't want to work with Danny Trejo is that I was worried he wouldn't be believable as a land baron from the 1880's. Turns out I was wrong.

Danny's name surfaced almost immediately in preproduction. That worried me a bit. As we began casting in earnest, his name came up again. Now I was getting really worried. I worried he didn't exude wealth and I worried that he didn't seem to come from another era.

To be clear, the role of Vargas Dias in *All Souls Day* is not complicated but, driving home each day from casting, I worried that Danny Trejo would be laughable in a vintage get-up. I had big ideas for Victorian sunglasses and a custom shiny vest with little mirrors embroidered into it.

"Isn't there another well-known Mexican actor we should look at?", I asked the producer and casting director for the 10th tenth time.

Like who?

"Um-, I don't know. Ricardo Montalban? "



He's not Mexican.

"I know. Danny Trejo is great. But... imagine him in knickers. I'm worried."

Stop worrying. He's an actor.

But I was still worried.

All Souls Day: Dia De Los Muertos was my second movie and I was essentially a hired hand -, albeit the director.

My first film (*The Attic Expeditions*) had taken four years to make: from the first day of production to its actual release. That's not including the seven initial years of trying to figure out how to get it financed and made. When it came out (in 2001), I was crestfallen that the new breed of interweb troll-critics was unkind. And now, when I got the call about *All Soul's Day* several years later, I had to admit no one was banging down my door to finance more of my movies. The script for *All Souls Day* was a bit of a mess and I worried that the fans would tear it--and me--up. However, I didn't want to miss the opportunity to make a movie that was going to happen with or without me. And now I was scared my bad guy would be bad, but in the wrong way.

When he showed up for the read-through, Danny Trejo was a true blessing. He shook hands with everyone: cast members, producers, production assistants. He knew he was a star but he acted like he was just happy to have a job. It was stunning to watch.

And then the read-through started.

Every fear I had was affirmed. He sounded strained. The words didn't flow and it was like watching a gang-member in the Prison-Players Production of *The Settling of California*.

Afterwards, I sat with my producer and I worried. He looked stressed too. Fuck it, we decided. I'd call Danny and check in with him. See how he feels.

Hi Danny. It's Jeremy. The director of *All Souls Day*.

Hi! I'm glad you called me, Chief. Bet you were just sweating it after the read-through, huh?

Well... No! You're gonna be great.

Look, I just need time to learn the words. Once that happens, I can play this guy great. I know it. Might have to change some dialogue to sound right coming out of my mouth. I don't want to screw up those big words. That okay with you, Chief?

Of course, Danny!

Okay. So don't worry, you hear?

Danny Trejo had read my mind, assured me of his process and eased my fears in thirty seconds. Wow.

Okay. Should we talk about costumes? I have some thoughts...

A few weeks later, when we shot, Danny wore the Victorian sunglasses and custom-made mirrored vest. And he looked amazing in it. But more importantly, he inhabited the role of Vargas Dias beautifully and he was truly an icky bad guy. And great to work with. I learned that actors, even famous ones, can stretch some. And that they all have their process.

Lesson learned:

Don't be afraid to check in with your cast and rework the roles a bit for them.

Other lesson learned:

As you suspected, Danny Trejo IS a great guy.

