

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 48

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

Alt-right fantasy 'Death Wish' too far for NRA

Release delayed in wake of Las Vegas mass shooting; film dropped right after Parkland

Somebody's got to do it. That's the takeaway from "Death Wish," (my former employer) MGM's alt-right remake of the 1974 Charles Bronson "Mitty-with-a-Magnum" vigilante classic.

This human-prey shootout was originally scheduled for release during the Thanksgiving weekend, following the Oct. 1 Las Vegas country music concert massacre.

The film's debut was delayed until March 2 — 16 days after the Feb. 14 Parkland, Fla., school shooting. Hardly an improvement.

One can argue that the best time to release a pro-gun movie is when public debate over gun restraints is at a crest. But even the NRA does not promote (though it may defend) self-deputized street executions.

Now backpedaling, the movie's director Eli Roth says his intention with "Death Wish" was to make a "family" movie. If that is the case, then my advice to anyone invited to join Roth for a "family" occasion is to run like hell — get out.

In Roth's Chicago-based remake, Dr. Paul Kersey (Bruce Willis) is a trauma surgeon, apparently based at Rush. He lives a pastoral suburban life in Evanston with his beautiful daughter (Camila Morrone), who is on her way to college, and his

PhD. wife (Elisabeth Shue). His deferential deadbeat brother Frank (Vincent D'Onofrio), who hints at anger issues in Kersey's past, can be a tough guy when life requires it. Frank jokes about being a mooch although, on some level, his brother won't let him escape this assigned role.

The family's idyll is shattered when a parking valet passes off their home address to a ring of robbers. Bad guys break into the house while Kersey is in surgery. He learns of his wife and daughter's brutalization as they are rolled into his emergency room.

The good doctor goes into a funk. He can't stand to be in the house anymore and battens down in a bunker-like garage. He visits a shrink and rides the L

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incessantly to pass his days. The overwhelmed police detectives assigned to the case (Dean Norris and Kimberly Elise), deferential and ineffective as his brother, are no help.

When Kersey filches a gun forsaken by a gang member brought in as a trauma patient, everything changes. Forgetting his oath to first do no harm, Kersey embarks on an autodidactic course of firearms training,



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watching instructional YouTube videos and practicing on targets in the basement bunker. Soon he is ready to plunge, fully loaded, into the urban Chicago night.

Let the gore begin.

After the Boston Marathon bombing, Mark Wahlberg, a Boston native, starred in a film about the tragedy called "Patriots Day."

The people of Boston hated the movie. They were granularly familiar with the details of the incident, down to the names and families of those who lost life and limb or committed acts of kindness and bravery. It was irritating to watch a Hollywood version of the event that seemed so different from their on-the-ground experience.

"Death Wish" may similarly chafe Chicagoans in the way it depicts the city. One has to assume that Chicago was chosen as the setting of the movie because its gun violence has been nationally sensationalized.

Instead of updating the movie to address contemporary issues, "Death Wish" lazily retrofits the problems of a yesteryear New York onto our big shoulders.

It doesn't even try to add

texture to the film by capturing the city's flavor. Perhaps because of the recent death of Chicago Police Cmdr. Paul Bauer, a scene in which a wounded Chicago cop bleeds out while he and his partner are stuck in a traffic jam particularly irked me. A cordon of squad cars would have cleared the way by blocking off every intersection leading to the hospital in the city I know.

My mind was free to drift to such discrepancies (the list is long) because the movie offered so little by way of plot or character development to fasten my attention.

The original Bronson "Death Wish," the ultimate revenge fantasy of its time, was unabashedly racial in depicting Kersey's targets (even though the assailants of his wife and daughter were white and he never found them).

Roth tries to even things out by making sure Kersey, dubbed "the Grim Reaper" by talk radio hosts, avenges crimes against black victims. He also scales way back on what was an extended rape scene in the original (featuring a young Jeff Goldblum as the offending criminal). Roth rightly assumes that today's audiences have raised the bar on accepting racism and sexual assault as entertainment since 1974. Even so, he badly miscalculates our bloodlust.

Americans are currently deep into a civic conversation about the ownership of guns, use of deadly force and ubiquity of school shootings. Except for Kersey's visit to a gun shop, Roth doesn't even try to update the movie's argument to resonate with 21st century concerns.

It's not fair to criticize a movie for what it isn't trying to be. But Roth intends "Death Wish" as a contemporary revisioning of the Bronson original (and its four sequels).

It fails because it is a series of assassinations without consequences — an arcade game — without the connective tissue of good storytelling.

Roth's phone is probably ringing right now — it's 1974 calling to get its film back.