

The Visitor

A Conversation with Tom McCarthy

05/15/08

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I'm talking with Thomas McCarthy, who played the character of Scott Templeton on *The Wire*, but he also wrote and directed *The Station Agent* and wrote and directed this more recent movie, called *The Visitor*, which we saw the other week which is now playing here in Baltimore, if you're listening from Baltimore, so you have a chance to hear it—see this movie after you hear this interview, which you should do. And Tom welcome and good to have you with us.

Thanks, great to be here.

So I—you know, I—let's start with the movie, and we can talk about maybe *The Wire* later on. But—you're character in *The Wire* was an ostensibly despicable kind of guy. [laughs]

We like to call him “morally challenged.”

That's good! [laughs] Winning the Pulitzer for no good reason, but-- [laughter]

I was walking my dog through SoHo the other day and a guy pulled up in a Verizon truck repairman and just slowly rolled down his window and looked at me and goes “You're a bad man.” [laughter] And I thought “I think I know what he's talking about,” and he's like “You're a liar, aren't you.” And I knew what he was talking about.

That's great.

Everybody else on the corner was looking at me like, why is the Verizon guy picking on that poor dude? It was pretty funny and then he starting laughing, he's like, “I love that show,” he was a really nice guy actually, but it was a pretty funny intro.

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That's very funny. So, *The Visitor*.

Yeah.

Describing it—rather than me do it, why don't you describe a minute what this movie is for the folks who've not seen it yet before we dive into some other nuances of it.

Yeah, you know, it's funny, as with my last film, *The Station Agent*, I have yet to come down with the perfect one line of the movie. And—and I think it's probably indicative of not only the movies I make, but the movies I like. Sometimes the movies I like just—they have a plot, kind of goes in places you don't expect, even if it's in a very simple way, but they're harder to sort of break down as opposed to, you know, it's a cop movie or it's a this or it's that. But basically, this deals with this sort of aging teacher, professor in a small college who comes down to New York and has a, a run in with a couple of young people who are living in this apartment. He's not expecting them to be there, it's a place that he doesn't use very often, and they thought they had legally subletted the place. It's a young Syrian guy musician and this Senegalese, this African woman who's a jewelry designer. Just two young artists, a couple. And he—after their first rather awkward and kind of exciting introduction, they become friends and it starts to—the story unfolds from there about how they kind of all effect each other's lives and then sooner or later we get into the question—some of the questions about immigration and detention that are happening around the country right now. And the story unfolds from there.

[Clip from *The Visitor*]

Where's Tarek?

He was arrested.

What?

Yes. In the subway.

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Arrested?

It was just a misunderstanding. They said he'd be released later tonight.

How could this happen? He knows better, he wouldn't do anything wrong.

No, he didn't. He didn't. I'm sure it'll be okay.

No, it won't be okay.

No, I went down to the precinct and made a statement.

That doesn't matter! We are illegal. We are not citizens. And when they find out, they're going to—excuse me.

[Clip ends]

I wonder, both with this movie and *The Visitor*—both with *The Visitor* and your former movie, *The Station Agent*, you leap into worlds that don't seem to be your worlds. I mean, you're not a sixty-two year old frustrated Economics professor, you're not a young Syrian immigrant or his beautiful Syr—mother, or you're not—and you're not the—the Senegalese woman, who's in her twenties.

Yeah.

I mean, how you put yourself, I mean as actors put themselves in a lot of places they've never been, but you're also now doing this as a writer and director.

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Right. It is, it's something that, you know, I don't take on lightly. In fact, I think whenever you're writing for someone who's a different age, a different sex, a different race, a different nationality, there comes with that a certain amount of responsibility that you hope, when the audience sees it, that can related directly to that character. That they get it, and that they believe it's authentic. And that—that's no—that's something as a writer, if you're a responsible writer I think you take very seriously. Because those are the—you know, you want all those people to be—to believe in the world of the movie, and part of that comes with me really taking my time with the script and sort of delving into different—whether it's communities or occupations or experiences, say, spending a lot of time in the Arab community in new york, or spending a lot of time specifically in like, African immigrate community in—in New York and Harlem and the Bronx, and—just talking and listening to people. Getting to know people and then slowly developing the script and then a big part of it has to do with when I bring my actors on. I try to bring—cast the actors as close and authentically to the role as possible and then rely on them to—to complete the sketch of the character, really, to make that character fully realized, realistic, authentic as possible and you know, it's something we worry about right through the shooting process is something we spend a lot of time and intention and detail focusing on.

[Clip from *The Visitor*]

So what is this Staten Island?

I don't know, we would just go there then come back. We never got off.

Why?

It was free. We felt like we were going somewhere. Oh. That's where the Twin Towers were. I never saw them, but Tarek did. And—there's the statue! And behind that is Ellis Island. Sometimes Tarek would point at the statue and jump up and down like we are arriving in New York for the first time. It was very funny.

[Clip ends]

But in this film, I mean, in *The Visitor*, you—there's a couple things I want to ask you about, because many things struck me as I was watching this movie. One was that you had these characters who come from very culturally different places. A white guy from Connecticut tenured at a university, and this Palestinian Syrian family, mother and son, and a young Senegalese woman and

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—it's the way you address but don't address the issue of race and all the subtleties of that. And what was going through your mind with the subtleties of that—and the subtleties of the prison guards where they took Tarek, this young Syrian man when he was arrested for trying to get through a turnstile and put him into a detention center because he was an undocumented immigrant into America and the—the prison guards personnel were all black in this—it just, the juxtaposition of race in this movie was very interesting, the way you did it in it's subtlety, I think.

Right. You know it's—it is, it's something that—I think, when you're writing, in a lot of, like I said is based on research, on based on facilities, is going in and saying okay, well like take for instance the detention facility. What are these places? Many of them are privately run, they're farmed out by the government, and they're basically privately run institutions set in a community. Whatever community that, specifically in Queens and Elizabeth, New Jersey, and then where do they draw their labor from, well I was visiting these places for a year and primarily they were local people. You know, it's like a minimum wage job, basically, you know. And I think, you know, we go to great pains in the movie to say hey, the guards here aren't the problem, these are mostly just men and women working daily, working to make a living. And this is the job that's offered, it's bigger than that. So. I think it's really just trying to remain as honest to my personal experience with people and, and with relationships and—it was funny, I did this screening one time, somewhere in the country, because we'd been traveling out the film's rolling out wide, we'd been traveling out all over the country, doing screenings, and someone walked up to me afterwards and said "You know, I thought it was really interesting, why did you choose to make that a—you know, make the boyfriend Syrian and the woman African, that's cross cultural," kind of thing, and—you know, it didn't even dawn on me, [laughs] I was like, what do you mean? Of course this guy would be with this woman, look at her! And he's not bad looking either, and he's a musician and she's an artist, and like, I guess that, you know, it was funny because in—with all the other elements of the story that I really had to think out, that, to me, was just so natural, such a natural connection. And it's just funny, depending on where you are and what you're personal life experience is, some things, you know, some things seem more improbable or probable than others. And I think, especially living in New York, right now, I mean it's just—you know.

Right.

It's such a crazy, crazy, wonderful mix of people and cultures. And, you know. It's like, for instance, you go to the street fairs. The street—she's a—she designs jewelry and sells it at these fairs, and I spent a lot of time in these fairs, and, I mean, these fairs are Babble. It's amazing there. It is every language, every nationality, every thing in these small street fairs, because there's a lot young artists who come here, can't get papers to work properly so they sell—they sell the art the make, and it's everything from t-shirts to jewelry to hats to wallets to whatever they're making. And they're pretty extraordinary places. You know. They're pretty representative of just what a melting pot New York can be at times. It's pretty cool.

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[Clip from *The Visitor*]

Hi.

Hi. Her stuff is good, right?

Beautiful.

She gave me this.

Very nice.

So Walter and I are going to the park to play for a bit. Okay?

Alright. Remember I told you we have to pick up my new table today. He said they'd only hold it for today.

Oh, I know, I know—no problem.

Tarek, you always say 'no problem' and then you are late or you forget.

I know. I will not now, I will go up and play and I will come right back. I promise, Habib.

Habib. You're very sweet when you want your way, huh? Goodbye!

Bye.

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It closes at 5PM, Tarek! No "Arab" time!

No Arab time. [inaudible] time.

[Clip ends]

And you—a couple of things about this film, I mean, that really hit me were that the—again, capturing—I don't know what word to use other than what I used a moment ago, which is the subtlety of it. Whether it was not beating people over the head with the private corporatization of prisons, just having the name up there or the fact that the—the only oppositional force, which was in a sense the American government and it's laws and this prison were unseen. They were like the invisible force that were kind of in the middle of everybody's life, here.

Yeah. Well, again, I think that is indicative of—of a lot of problems, whether you're getting a parking, you know, ticket, and you don't know who to yell at of course, you're getting—you know, you can't get through to a credit card company or your cable company or in many times, many instances, your government and there's something very disempowering about the process and dehumanizing about it, and, and it can be—I think, I think that's something in the film that everyone relates to. It's like, you don't even know where to turn, who to yell at, who to act out against, who to seek help from, and I think especially right now in the world of immigration, it's such a complex time and period in our country in terms of that. And the legal process is just terribly, terribly confusing. And to see people who come here who don't even have a command, a great command of the English language, kind of understand, to navigate this, it's pretty harrowing just on a really simple personal level. And, and to think even further, there are a lot of people who are in these detention centers don't have any sort of legal representation, is even scarier. That these guys are trying, these men and women are put away in these places and they don't have much access—any access to the outside world or any access to legal help. It's one of those things you kind of look and and think well, this is something, immigration's a tricky question, but maybe this is something we can do better.

There was an article on the front page of *The Washington Post* just the other day—I think it was Sunday, even, maybe--

Yeah.

About—about the people dying in custody.

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Yeah, *60 Minutes* did a piece on it, Nina Bernstein did a couple pieces in *The New York Times* and editorials followed. So it's interesting, you know, the movie came out about five weeks ago and there has just been a slew of—and I don't think it's related to the movie, I think it's one of those Zeitgeist moments where, you know, immigration reform has been happening so quickly over the last ten years, and I think finally the public's starting to catch up with okay, this is, you know, we had to handle, we had to do something to sort of deal with this, but what are the results? What are the human results? And I think, you know, this movie, that's probably as political as it gets. It doesn't try to tear down the system or just point fingers, but rather it just says do we all know this is happening, and is this—is this how we would want it run in our name. And I know just traveling around, a lot of people don't have any idea about these detention centers, these sort of modern day interment camps, which are sort of tucked away in all our towns and cities. It's interesting to hear people's response once they see the movie and sort just—subtly say, oh, is that really what's happening?

[Clip from *The Visitor*]

This is not fair! I am not a criminal. I've committed no crime. What do they think? I'm terrorist? There are no terrorist in here. The terrorists have money. They have support. This is just not fair.

I know.

How do you know? You're not here.

I'm sorry. I...

I sit in here at night and I keep thinking about Zainab. I just want to live my life and play music. What's so wrong about that?

[Clip ends]

I think people do not know, and the—the other part of it is, I think, is—whether it's this movie or the other things you've done, is the way you

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approach human beings. I mean there's a gentleness to this movie. I mean it's very poignant and it's, in many ways, very painful, on some levels—

Right.

...Especially towards the end. But the humanness of these characters, and their relationship is also something that you don't see often. We don't get a chance to explore the human spirit in most movies today, I think.

Yeah, I think some of that is twofold. One, taking the time to really set up the characters and then really trusting good actors and I think both those things have to be in place for it to work. I mean, you know, to—to get back to what you started with, I think it's something David Simon and all those guys did so well on *The Wire* you know, they—it's real—talk about subtle and talk about character development, talk about patience. And the pay off, that's why after five years people were you know, devastated when that series ended. I think I know a lot of friends who went into *Wire* mourning after the last episode. And you know, also the—the compassion you felt for characters on all sides of the situation, and all sides of the stories. You know. And I think that comes with—it's really easy to vilify people, these terms like “illegal aliens,” and these terms that completely dehumanize people, but—

Right.

...When you know somebody, when you can put a face to it, when you understand where that person's come from and get a little bit a sense of walking in their shoes, just even the slightest sense, then of course it's impossible to do completely, but a slight sense of wow, you know—they, you know, this is where they're coming from and this is what they've had to overcome to get here and maybe we need to do a case by case sort of examination before we cast a wide net, you know. But I think that's—I think that's certainly something I learned working on the show, I was a fan of *The Wire* for a long time before I joined it on the fifth season and, you know, it's something I really—pay those guys a lot of credit for. I think they're sort of masters at that.

Well, you know—it was—there were some other pieces in this where I—where you—the blurring of the American flag was an interesting cinematic choice that you made.

Yeah. Well you know, I tell you we shot in that international terminal of Newark and like, with a lot of films our size, we didn't have a huge budget so it wasn't like we were

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buying the airport for a week and we were getting to the point in the day where we were saying "Okay, this international terminal part's become very active." I wasto the point where I kept grabbing people thinking you stand over here and they're looking at me like I was crazy and I realized *oh, you're not an extra. You really are from Saudi Arabia.* And we were having that trouble because people started showing up for flights and everything. But you know, we want to shoot that final scene, or one of those final scenes. And then that flag was just—it's an enormous flag, and it's so prevalent in that situation, it was kind of a—one of those decisions my DP and I made on the spot of like, we gotta go up to that. It's just a perfect, perfect way to leave it. And I think that it, you know, just sort of delicately asks the question or sort of raises the question of in whose name and how are we handling it. But, yeah, I'm very happy with that moment, actually. That's a little bit of, you know, location luck as it would be.

[Clip from *The Visitor*]

Walter, I know you're a very smart man, but with a drum you have to remember not to think. Thinking just screws it up. Okay?

Okay.

I give it a couple bangs. [strikes drum] Not so hard. You're not angry at it.

Okay. Sorry. Okay. [Drum]

Better. Did you think?

No.

Good. Tak, tak, tak, one, two, three—come on. Follow me. [Drum] Don't worry, in time together. Good! Don't worry...

[Clip ends]

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Now how did you find these actors? I mean these, I mean—Richard Jenkins, 'cause—people know him from *Six Feet Under*, where he played the deceased father.

Yeah. You know Richard's one of those guys who—he's, you know, I traveled around the country. It's like, people know him everywhere in the—you know, from—he's been in so many types of movies, some of these really broad comedies, the Farley Brother's movies, to obviously a lot of the Cohen brother's movies, to—to so many things that people know him, and he's one of “that guy,” oh my god, you know, t's “that guy.” A lot of people hear the name and they're “Oh, I don't know him completely,” but then they see him and they're like, oh, yeah, I've seen him in.... you know, so many things. And I really wanted a character, and again, it's similar to *The Wire*, right? I think one of the reasons *The Wire* was such an effective series is he used a lot of actors that had been working and were incredibly talented for many years, but weren't stars outright, you know. Weren't like, headliners. And therefore, you're just seeing like, wonderful actors at the top of their game, but you're not so familiar with them you know everything about they're personal lives in real life. So you can really suspend disbelief and dive in with that character. And it's really what I was hoping to get from Richard and I think it worked out for us, he was—you know, the guy has been working for so long, and this is in essence his first lead role in a movie.

That's interesting.

And you know, you're getting a guy who's worked with so many other great actors and directors and writers that—you're getting a lot of bang for your buck with that actor, so to speak. So we're—I was—I wrote it with him in mind. And actually did the same thing with Hiam Abbass, who plays the mother, Mouna. She's an actress, Palestinian actress out of Paris, now. I'd seen her in a lot of movies coming out of Europe and out of the Middle East and just, really felt like she was right for the story.

[Clip from *The Visitor*]

Walter, do you go to Broadway?

No, not really.

Tarek sent me the CD for the Phantom of the Opera for my birthday. I think I know every word.

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Tarek is teaching me the drum.

Really? How's that going?

Well I—I sound a lot better when he's playing with me.

[Clip ends]

She was an amazing, she was perfect for the story. I mean, her—

Yeah.

Her ability, and I know, as an actor to slide also between languages and cultures—she's...

Yeah, yes. She's really—she just, you know, it's a difficult role because she really doesn't enter the movie 'til almost halfway through. Maybe a little less than that. But—you know, you need an actress that can come in and really grab the audience. It's hard. And I think she does it to such integrity and power and she's just—as a woman, and she's so beautiful, and original in that sense, but then she's also a terrific actress, so she really understands what she had to do and she did it very well.

Now, what about the other two? Haaz Sleiman?

Yeah, Haaz Sleiman and Danai Gurira. Haaz, Haaz is from Lebanon originally. And I just found him—those two I just had to do casting and we looked. We looked in New York, L.A., London, Paris, just did a wide casting call for Arab actors of that age and then for African actresses of that age. And it was very important to me that I had someone who you know, really could connect with the character culturally. With Haaz, he had a very similar journey, being from Lebanon which of course is a neighbor of Syria. He moved to Michigan and then to New York to pursue music, much like his character did. That was just a coincidence. And then with Danai, she's of Zimbabwe descent. She was born here, but grew up in Zimbabwe, spent her life there and then came back here to train at—at

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NYU, at the acting school there and both just like really wonderful, talented actors and this is really their—for both of them, their first major roles. And it was really exciting to kind of find these two actors who were so gung-ho and so right for the roles and then pair them with these two older veteran actors who've been—done many many movies. It's a really fun way to work, it keeps it really fresh, you know.

There was a lot of balance to this all the way around.

Yeah.

Really.

Definitely.

So, how do you end up making a movie like this? I mean, how does somebody like you who is—who really has spent, spending his time acting in a lot of different roles, looking at your filmography here, and come up with the ability to go out and make a *Station Agent* or *The Visitor*, because it takes chutzpah, luck and money to do this.

Yeah, yeah. I think, you know, after I made *The Station Agent*, I had a little bit of—you know, good will capital to play with that I think people were ready to trust me a little bit more, knowing that the stories I told were a little less, I don't know what the word is, maybe conventional. And I had a little bit of a different way of telling the story. So I think, you know, making that first movie and having it do well really helped a lot. And then, you know, obviously I didn't rush. There was four years between the two movies, so it's not like I'm cranking them out or anything. [laughter] It takes me a while to get to the story. I wish I was a more prolific writer at times. But the good side is it gave me some years to really kind of reflect on what I wanted to do, and also to do a bunch of acting and, you know, I was, I had just shot *The Visitor*, just finished shooting it, and was starting the editing process when David called and asked about *The Wire* and he was in London at the time I think. And just, you know, he remembered from an earlier audition years ago and just said, you know, I have this role I think you're really right for, and I'd love you to do it and I think you'd have a good time, and—he didn't have to say much more than that. I was a huge fan of the show at that point, and the—you know, it's such an exciting thing to be able to join a show when you're a fan of it. It's such an unusual thing. And the only catch was I was just starting my editing process and that's the only thing that made me hesitate, that I wanted to be able to—I didn't want to split my focus too much, that sort of both things suffered. So. You know, they were great and, you know, it was really for a couple months there was—when I wasn't in the editing room I was down in Baltimore shooting and then back to the edit room and then back to

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Baltimore. But there's something nice about that, it gives you a, it gives you a distance from both things, you know what I mean? You're able to clear your head and get your mind out of it and—being on set was always such a pleasure, by that point those guys had it down, you know. It just was like—they were everyone. Those characters were so engrained, the crew was so great, the writing was so there—the—it was such a joy to just walk on set knowing you're in the hands of pros and just kick back and do your part and try to be a part of it, not ruin the show. [laughter] That was my biggest fear. Our biggest fear, Clark Johnson and I used to joke about that. We're like, man, I hope we don't go down as the guys who ruined *The Wire*.

[laughs] Why would you think that? You and Clark?

Because! It's such a great show, you know? Yeah, you're like, I don't want to be the guy to screw it up! I don't want to miss the shot at the buzzer! It's like that fourth season was so amazing, and also we knew that David and Bill Zorzi and all those great writers on the show and of course, you know, they—these guys worked in the newspaper business. Especially David and Bill. And like, this was their baby. This was, you know, this was something they felt very right about. So we felt, you know, a little bit beholden to try to get it right ourselves for them.

So the—the character you played, that character was one of the pivotal characters in that season, in sort of defining what David and Ed especially, I guess, what David was trying to say about the—whether US presses, now, your character who—ended winning this Pulitzer for a story that he made up, Scott Templeton.

Right.

That, that was a, that must have been a very interesting character for you to get into.

It was great, because, you know, part of it is with the writing, I didn't know where it was going. So every time I'd get down to set, you know, I'd usually get down when they were already shooting the next episode and I went to the makeup trailer, everyone would be like, "Whoa, boy. Wait 'til you see what you do." And I'd be like, "Uh-oh." [laughter] Uh. It was just fun. It was fun, you know. Clark and I had been friends for a long time. And I've been a fan of his work and have known him personally--

Yeah, Clark is good.

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It was fun to kind of like, go toe-to-toe with him and, you know, watch that play out. He was—he was, he called me actually, he watched the premiere, I think down in Philly or in Baltimore, it was somewhere, some kind of big party, and he's like, just so you know, man, when you got that Pulitzer, the whole room booed. [laughter] And I was like, "Cool! Job well done." But yeah, it is funny to play a character that is so disliked, I have to say.

Well it's good, though. It's good for an actor to play characters that are not liked.

Oh, it's great!

It's the best thing to do.

It's almost better than being the good guy.

Absolutely. There's no question about it. I mean that—yeah, you can—you can really cut your acting chops on sleazier roles than you can on sweeter roles, in some ways.

Oh, totally. I think, totally. I mean it's just such a nice—and I—think it's a great thing about *The Wire*, right? There wasn't necessarily a good or a bad guy. They were guys that were all sort of conflicted and like, you know, these guys who you thought were heroes then they would do something to undermine that. And I think that's what made that show so human, you know.

So now, between this, this world of film making, clearly, something else is going to bubble up in your head and you're going to start thinking about what you want to do next, in the next few years. As a director and writer, as a film maker. And you're also an actor. So are you split and torn between whether Tom McCarthy wants to become Tom McCarthy the actor, or the filmmaker, or remain both?

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I'd like to remain both. I think it's kind of fun, you know. Acting is such a wonderful job, it's such a good job. You get to go on, you work with great—I'm doing a movie right now, doing Tony Gilroy's new movie. He's the guy who did "Michael Clayton."

Oh yeah.

And it's like, this great cast. Julia Roberts and Clive Owen and Paul Giamatti and Tom Wilkinson. And, you know. We're going down to the Bahamas for a week right now. I mean, like, you know, that's not the coal mines. This is a pretty good occupation when you're doing things like that. And it's a fun script, and a great character, and—again, I'm somewhat morally challenged, which I think I'm going to have to start to reflect upon if these roles keep coming in.

You're hoping that they're not typecasting?

[laughter] Exactly. I'd have to say maybe you see something in my character that makes me right for these roles. I'd have to say it was pretty funny doing a press tour for *The Visitor* because, you know, as we've been rolling *The Visitor* out all over the country, you know, I walk into these rooms, and, you know, there's one pe—if there's one people that tuned into the fifth season, it's reporters. It's newspaper people. They were watching *The Wire*, because every—and most interviews I go into, they don't know, they don't put together, me as a director and me as the actor and I walk in and they kind of like, freeze, like, oh, oh no, it's Templeton! [laughter] I got a lot of—I had to do a lot of back talk, and—uh, some people were not, you know. It was very funny to see people's faces. You know when they were *Wire* fans.

So this—in *The Visitor*, I mean, it's playing in two places in Baltimore now. You know that—it's at the Landmark and at the Rotunda.

Oh, cool.

It was actually jam packed when we were there, the other weekend. Last weekend at the Rotunda. It was just filled. It was amazing. I was there with a group of people and we sat up for three or four hours afterward just talking about the film, so it's a...

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Well that's great to hear. Yeah, it's been doing really, you know, as you said you never know how these types of movies are going to play, you never—they're a little more serious. Yeah, it's got some funny moments, but it's a little bit different, it's not your summer blockbuster, but you know, it's been playing really well. The box offices have been really great. The word of mouth has been tremendous. And that's—you know, you heard about it.

Right, right.

So it's kind of like, that's who we rely on, we rely on people talking about it and so far we've—it's been really exciting to watch it kind of get out there.

Well, Tom McCarthy, I appreciate you taking the time here. It's been wonderful to talk to you and good luck with this film and everything else.

Thanks a lot, I appreciate the support.

It's been great, Tom McCarthy, good to talk to you.

You're listening to a production of the Center for Emerging Media. Our producers are Justin Levy and Jessica Phillips. Our engineer is Andrew Eppig. And thanks to Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design for studio space. To hear more and learn more, visit on the web at www.centerforemergingmedia.com. And for the Center for Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take care.

-transcript by Judith Lloyd