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MOVIES 9:53 a.m. Thursday, November 26, 2009

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'It's really about the here and now'

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By Gina Piccalo
For the AJC

When it comes to his work, Viggo Mortensen is nothing if not thorough.

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Javier Aguirresarobe, The Weinstein Co.
Viggo Mortensen, known for his intense preparations for his film roles, stars as a man living at the end of the world in "The Road."

He took a road trip through the Midwest and spent time recording co-star Maria Bello's uncle, a Philadelphia native, to nail his accent for "A History of Violence."

To understand his Russian mobster of "Eastern Promises," Mortensen set out alone for Moscow, St. Petersburg and the Ural Mountain region of Siberia, spending weeks driving around without a translator.

But for "The Road," the 51-year-old Dane was already physically and emotionally spent, having just shot "Promises" and "Appaloosa" back to back, then attending to the rigors of being an Oscar nominee (for "Promises").

He hardly needed much preparation for his striking turn as a man wracked by loss and the physical strain of staying alive long enough to save his own son.

While sipping a cup of Yerbe Buena tea in a hotel room that overlooked Beverly Hills, Mortensen talked about how he braced himself to portray a man living at the end of the world.

Q: What was it about this role that struck you as important? You had been working a lot when you got this script, but then you read it and you felt you needed to do it.

A: I wasn't really in a good physical or mental state. I was kind of tired just from shooting two or three movies in a row. And then promoting them. I hadn't stopped for a day and needed to just recuperate physically and mentally and just spend time with my family. And all those things. Life, you know? ... [But then] I read it. I said, "Oh wow. This is an emotionally tough journey, but it makes me feel and think so many things." It's a very personal kind of story. ... It could transport you and remind you of things you know in your heart about the value of life itself, about the importance of being kind, even if there's no reason to be, of continuing of wanting to survive. That there were some answers here to be found. So I said, "Yeah. I'll do it. At least I'm really

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tired. I'll have a leg up there."

Q: When were you shooting this?

A: This movie was almost ready but not quite this time last year. And I'm glad they didn't put it out. Because if they weren't sure, I don't think it was probably structured as well as it is now. It wouldn't have been as good an adaption if they'd rushed it. ... So the time we were shooting was quite a while ago. I got the role and was in the middle of shooting "Appaloosa" and at the same time, somehow promoting on evenings and weekends "Eastern Promises" and then surprisingly being nominated for awards and also having to travel to places. The day before we started shooting, I was at the Oscars, you know? Which is why I had that beard. It was kind of stressful. But that stress put me at a fragile place to begin with which probably helped me, just take that leap that I was going to have to take one way or another.

Q: You prepared so intensely for your role as the Russian gangster in "Eastern Promises." How did you prepare for this one?

A: This wasn't the same. I couldn't really do that. ... I did do what I usually do. I was specific about where the character was from and what his name was and why I spoke with a particular kind of accent based on being from a certain specific place and having moved to another. ... I listened to certain kinds of music, watched certain kinds of movies, read certain things, to get myself in that frame of mind.

Q: What kinds of music?

A: All kinds of stuff. Mostly classical music and some older songs just because of the lyrics and what they evoked in me.

Q: Which movies did you watch?

A: I looked at, for example, Maria Falconetti's performance in [the 1928 film] "The Passion of Joan of Arc," which I watched too many times. But that was sort of a touchstone. And then, visually, some [Andrei] Tarkovsky movies. For the boy, [the 1962 film] "Ivan's Childhood" and some others. [Aleksandr] Sokurov's [1997] movie "Mother and Son," this beautiful poem of a movie. But in the end, I had to kind of cast them all away as you always do. But never more so than in the experience of shooting this movie, telling this story, because it really didn't matter any more than knowing why the world was in the state it was. It's really about the here and now. And I felt like that the environments that we were shooting in, that were so real and so naked, were a measuring stick. I had to be at that level. That kind of helped me. Not just that it was cold and stuff, which helped both of us, actingwise. But the brutality of the environment and this open wound of nature in its death throes, the toughness of that. You had to be at that level somehow.

Q: Did you come to any conclusions or reach any sort of epiphany after working through this material so rigorously?

A: It's always better, no matter what excuse there is for not being kind, to be kind. To be loving.

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