

# The Next Three Days: a thriller with something more on its mind

Joanne Laurier  
30 December 2010

*Written and directed by Paul Haggis*

Canadian-born writer-director Paul Haggis's fourth feature, *The Next Three Days*, is a thriller involving a Pittsburgh couple whose mainstream lives collapse when the wife is accused of a murder she claims she did not commit.

A reworking of the 2008 French film *Pour Elle* (*Anything for Her*) by Fred Cavayé, the Haggis film deals with the formidable efforts of John Brennan (Russell Crowe) to rescue his spouse Lara (Elizabeth Banks) from a supposedly unjust fate.

After introducing the protagonists, the film leaps ahead three years. Lara has been found guilty of murdering her boss and, after exhausting all appeals, is sentenced to life imprisonment. John and Lara's son Luke begins shutting himself off emotionally from his mother. Friends, family and even Lara's lawyer have all but accepted the conviction.

However, John, a community college professor, is an irreconcilable believer in his wife's innocence. During a lecture on Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, he rhetorically asks his students: "What if we choose to live in a reality of our own making?" He sets about trying to alter Lara's destiny, deciding the only option is to break her out of prison.

To begin with, John consults Damon Pennington (Liam Neeson), a seven-time prison escapee now turned author, who lays out the physical and mental requirements for performing the feat successfully. Damon stresses that avoiding eventual capture takes at least as much planning as the escape itself.

Much of the rest of the film is devoted to John's meticulous preparations, including obtaining new identities for his family and stealing money from homicidal street thugs.

*The Next Three Days'* tension is one of its intriguing elements, as is its effort to evoke the personality of the former steelmaking town. Haggis's claustrophobic method of filming high-impact scenes is effective in conveying a mood of intense danger and threat. Through flashbacks, the question of Lara's guilt or innocence is an ever-present factor in the drama.

Moreover, the film has an anti-establishment tinge in its implication that human life is undervalued by the current social structures in the US. If someone may not have committed a crime, how can due process ever be exhausted, particularly when the outcome is a death sentence or a life of incarceration? This concern propels *The Next Three Days* and provides much of its energy.

Unfortunately, however, the movie is too much a *fantasy* about opposition. It has many—too many—implausible elements, the primary one being the ease with which John jumps into the skin of a reckless risk-taker and potential assassin. Neeson's cameo comes up far short in terms of providing the psychological explanation and impetus for John's plunge into the underworld. The latter's transition is more akin to that of Clark Kent to Superman than one seriously prepared or motivated.

That writer-director Haggis is obliged to invent challengers and solutions to vexing social problems is not entirely his fault. His fantastic form of individual resistance is in part a response to the lack, as of yet, of *actual, mass opposition* in the US to the unceasing attacks of the elite in every sphere of life. The brutality and irrationality of the "law and order" atmosphere in which people are locked up for decades and put to death by state-sanctioned murder may especially horrify him.

In other words, the director's scheme for "beating the system" no doubt begins with a sincere concern about

certain social ills. Moreover, setting the film in Pittsburgh, identified in popular consciousness as an industrial and working class city, has vague implications.

And certain economic issues arise. Attempting to fight Lara's indictment and conviction has depleted the Brennans' modest resources, and John soon learns that trying to break her out of prison requires loads of cash. The undertaking, all in all, is a rich man's game.

However, there is no indication that Haggis's sentiments and thoughts go much deeper than this. What does not emerge in the film, directly or indirectly, is a cogent picture of American life. Indeed, despite the surface excitement and the frenzied goings-on, the film has no social and class urgency or a strong sense of the real level of popular anger and discontent. And this seriously weakens *The Next Three Days*.

The question of psychological and social truthfulness and its artistic-dramatic consequences comes up here. Transforming life into various artistic forms, including the film thriller, requires a manipulation that must show some respect for probability.

In his or her creative depths, the artist reconfigures recognizable elements of reality into new combinations that must reflect, in an especially revealing and essential manner, the way phenomena are combined in life. Otherwise, what is the point of the exercise?

All this requires more than a surface understanding of what exists. Action-packed, well-organized plot details cannot overcome the improbable and unbelievable, particularly when they involve the inner world of a character on which the entire film hinges. John's psychological state is more or less a closed book. We are simply confronted with a mild-mannered college teacher one day, a gun-toting avenger the next. This is not good enough.

As a writer and director, Haggis shows signs of interesting ideas and above-average skill, as well as a nonconformist and socially aware side. But his filmmaking contains much that is schematic and farfetched. The body of work is markedly uneven.

Haggis wrote the screenplay for Clint Eastwood's misanthropic *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and directed the murky, quasi-misanthropic *Crash* (2005); on the other hand, he scripted the laudable Eastwood film, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Most to his credit so far is *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), to date one of the

most moving and important anti-Iraq war films—which he wrote, directed and produced.

Haggis is the founder of Artists for Peace and Justice, which has organized many of his film industry colleagues in the service of building schools and medical clinics in the slums of Haiti.

In *The Next Three Days*, Haggis's more superficial impulses and his distance from the everyday reality of American life function to undermine the work's best feature—the central character's determination to oppose the facts of life as handed down by the powers that be. Despite Brennan's personal relentlessness, the film, ultimately, has an uncommitted and even complacent underbelly.

While enjoyable and engaging on a big screen in a dark theater, the impact of *The Next Three Days* barely lasts three minutes after the closing credits begin to roll.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**