



Why Miles Teller's New Show May Be His Most Controversial Project Yet

"We're trying to show pure evil on screen."

BY JOSH ST. CLAIR JUN 14, 2019



In the middle of the desert, in the middle of the frame, in the middle of his new 13-hour-long Amazon series Too Old to Die Young, Miles Teller watches a man dig a hole. The man digs with his hands. Teller watches. And watches. Director Nicolas Winding Refn shot Teller watching for more than twelve minutes before he was satisfied. Earlier, on a nearby stretch of the same New Mexican burial ground where the team was given permission to film, Refn shot Teller walking. And walking. “It’s probably like a five minute shot of us just walking across the desert,” Teller says. “Okay, are they going to cut? What’s going on here? Where’s the next shot?” he asks himself, recounting his reaction after seeing the final scene for the first time. “I loved it.”

At 13 hours, Too Old to Die Young will feel more like an extended director’s cut than a TV serial. In it, an L.A. cop, played by Teller, crosses into an underworld of hired assassins. It’s a straight, head-shooting storyline that values mood and suspense over dialogue and plot intricacy. And after Teller finishes watching the man dig, and the man finishes digging the hole, which in fact contains a buried container, which contains a buried kidnapped girl, Teller executes him. That’s one of the moods: downfall.

Teller says the slower series reminds him of an exercise from film school. “It’s called ‘Private Moment,’” he says. “You do something by yourself that you’d feel embarrassed or ashamed if anybody else saw you doing. And you then perform that in front of the class. I think Nic [Refn] is doing that. I think he's doing that a lot.”



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Teller has done intimate, private-moment-type roles before. After the standard early actor diet of low-budget indies, rom-coms, and remakes, Teller struck gold in 2014 with Damien Chazelle’s low-budget dramatic indie remake of his own short film, *Whiplash*. Teller then crashed his way into large studio films like *The Divergent Series* and *Fantastic Four* before returning in recent years to non-tent-pole projects: *War Dogs*, *Thank You For Your Service*, *Only the Brave*, and *Bleed for This*—all dramas based on real-life characters, all roles designed to expand Teller’s acting repertoire. (Teller’s next big role will be as the son of “Goose” in the upcoming film *Top Gun: Maverick*).

But Teller says working with “Nic” was a different professional experience. And with *Too Old to Die Young*, now streaming on Amazon Prime, he’s taken on perhaps his most time-consuming role: seven months of shooting and the equivalent of making almost six feature-length movies. Teller did it all because of Refn.

“Nic is an artist. And there’s not a lot of people in this business that are going for that.”



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Too Old To Die Young may also prove to be Teller’s most polarizing project.

The film, which recently screened Episodes 4 and 5 at the Cannes Film Festival, is dark, but with moments of surprising zaniness and camp. After Teller’s character executes the hole digger and rescues the girl, she—spoiler—turns around and stabs him with a knife before taking off across the desert. The scene is tense and tragic, but also unmistakably ... funny.

“Sometimes you’re thinking, ‘Okay, is there something wrong with me, because I found that funny?’” Teller says. “Was I not supposed to find that funny?”

Where do you stream shows and movies more often?

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In what became the defining scene of the Cannes premiere, a bloody warehouse manhunt turns into a drawn-out driving sequence to Barry Manilow’s “Mandy.”

“It becomes this campy-like music video in the middle of this really intense episode,” Teller says. “I was just cracking up the first time I saw it. Last night at the [L.A.] premiere, people were just dying. It’s so good.”

The dark humor helps to break up some of the series’ more intense moments and themes. Refn is notorious for bloody cinema and his films have featured everything from wrist-nailing and face-stomping to dismemberment and cannibalization. But Teller says he appreciates Refn’s treatment of violence. His style makes the violence hypnotic and hyperreal. The violence is a mood.



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As Teller's character navigates the L.A. underworld, though, he begins accepting contracts for the "worst guys," including pedophiles and rapists. And here the scenes begin depicting a different sort of violence and different kind of mood, one viewers will certainly be less comfortable experiencing. Though Refn balks when discussing what his films are "about," it's clear that at least one theme the series tackles is the treatment of women. And that kidnapped girl in the desert wasn't simply buried for a moment of violent comedy.

"We're trying to show pure evil on screen," Teller clarifies. "I can look at a painting. I can listen to a song. I can engage in all these different things that deal with this subject matter that we deal with." Teller's point is that themes of sexual violence permeate other mediums. It may be more uncomfortable to see them in film, but that treatment shouldn't somehow disqualify the film as art. And Teller says that the series, like the best art, isn't trying to make a statement. "We're putting it on screen. And then it's up to you. It's up to the viewer to decide how they feel about it."

TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG Official Trailer (2019) Nicolas Winding Refn, TV Serie...



Teller says reactions from the women in his life have been positive, and he doesn't believe that taking "offense" should be a gendered concern.

"Most of my team are women. And they all really enjoyed [the series]. You know, I don't think that sex has anything to do with what you're entertained or offended by. I think we can all humanize. Hopefully you can sympathize with woman and woman can with man. But as far as entertainment, what you find entertaining, what you find repulsive—that's just going to come down to the individual."

Still, seven months of shooting seems a huge commitment for an actor, especially when his final product may goad and offend as much as it dazzles. That Teller took the role anyway suggests that, at least for now, private moments are his main act.

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