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Steven Culp talks about his new movie, 13 Days

By MATT MCCORMICK
The Battalion

13 Days is a rare and profound film. Part historical drama, part thriller, this movie recreates the dark times of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The end result is a very intense film boasting performances from a cast including Kevin Costner as Kenny O'Donnell, a close adviser of the Kennedys; Bruce Greenwood as John F. Kennedy; and Steven Culp as Robert Kennedy. *The Battalion* recently participated in an interview with Culp and had the opportunity to let the actor talk about his role and the movie itself.

Q: The movie is really good and seems to appeal to a wider, more-universal audience instead of just an American audience. Do you agree?

A: It's not meant just for American consumption. [Director Roger Donaldson] was very conscious of it being a universal story, and he wanted to get away from anything that looked like flag-waving.

Q: How long did it take to make the movie?

A: Forget preparation. Cameras started rolling the first week of October [1999] and then we finished up principal photography last January [2000] and then they went off to the Philippines which doubled as Cuba.

I think they were shooting the Navy ships off of Rhode Island, and that took a couple of months. There was editing, sound and looping — putting it all together — and I think they put it to bed toward the end of October [2000].

Q: How does this role compare to some of your other favorite roles to date?

A: I feel lucky because I have had so many roles that I really enjoyed that have been really challenging. If you are doing a role like Bobby Kennedy, there is a lot that you have to assimilate and have under your belt. Forget about playing the scenes or acting. Just to arrive at work in the morning, you have to have acquired this stuff somehow. There is just plenty to go for.

Q: How would you characterize the experience of working with these people on this film?

A: It was tremendous.

Q: Would you work with them again?

A: Definitely.

Q: What research did you do to prepare for this role?

A: I did a ton of reading, watched film, listened to tapes. Working on the accent and trying to take on his physicality. I read about the Kennedys and not just the Cuban Missile Crisis, but their history and afterward too.

Where is he at in this point in his life? What is his trajectory? I was also working out with a trainer. I am naturally several inches taller than Bobby was and a little broader. Bobby was the runt. Not only was I taller than Bobby but I am also taller than Bruce [Greenwood]. I literally almost reshaped my body.

Q: How did it feel to perform in a historical movie of such magnitude in the country?

A: Great. It is kind of a profound feeling. Whenever had time to reflect on it, I just thought how fortunate was — what a privilege to be able to play this admirable man being and to be part of this great story.

It's about extraordinary but imperfect human beings who, in a crisis situation, transcend themselves and become great. I think the movie is good, though, because we don't portray them as saints. They are human beings.

Q: Why did you want to play this role?

A: What's not to like? Here I am, playing this role in Kevin Costner's new movie — great script, great director, wonderful cast. I really didn't think about that much.

Q: Have you received any feedback from historians?

A: Actually, the feedback that I have heard has been really good so far. I think that if you are coming to a movie to get what you would get from a history book, you are going to the wrong place.

I think everybody really respects the fact that it does adhere to the broad details of the story and the way it progressed. And it does a really good job of conveying more than people knew at the time — what a ticklish situation it was. There were days when they thought, "We're not going to wake up tomorrow."

Q: A lot of actors look at the screen and see different things than what the audience sees. Little flash scenes they wish they could go back and redo...

A: And I am one of them.

Q: So what do you see when you watch this film?

A: You know, I can evaluate everybody else, but I can not evaluate myself. Unfortunately, I will never be able to view it with fresh eyes. My in-laws were in town, we took them to see the movie over New Year's, and was the third time that I had seen it.

At one point, I turned to my wife and I said, "Bruce just keeps getting better and better. He's brilliant." I can do the same thing to my own work. The most I can do is, the first time I watched the movie, I was really able to just sit and enjoy the movie despite the fact that I was it. Maybe in 20 years, I will be able to look at it and say, "That's pretty good."

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