

On An Academy Award Injustice

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“John Wick” is a 2014 film starring Keanu Reeves directed by Chad Stahelski from a screenplay by Derek Kolstad. (At this writing, a sequel has just been released.) I didn’t see “John Wick” when it first came out, but tonight (February 22nd, 2017) I watched a DVD of it.

Fine film. I was particularly taken by Derek Kolstad’s brilliant screenplay. The dialogue, the language, was elevated, artful; the term Shakespearean comes to mind. I assumed that he must have won an Academy Award for it. I decided to look into it. Notable past nominees for best original screenplay at the Academy Awards, so I read in Wikipedia, have included John Steinbeck, Noel Coward, Raymond Chandler, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Arthur C. Clarke, Lillian Hellman, Neil Simon, Paddy Chayefsky, Tom Stoppard, and Terence Rattigan. Based on his work in “John Wick,” Derek Kolstad is very much in that company; in fact, I’d put him in the top tier of that prestigious list. And I noted in my investigations that I’m not alone in my admiration for Kolstad’s superb accomplishment. “Entertainment Weekly” magazine, for example, described his screenplay as “marvelously rich” and “a stylish feat.”

However, and to my astonishment and incredulity, it turns out that Kolstad not only didn’t win the Academy Award for best original screenplay in 2015 as I was certain he must have, he wasn’t even nominated—the winners were the four co-writers of “Birdman,” which won for best picture that year. I can only guess that movie industry machinations, studio infighting, personal grievances, something of that sort, accounted for this gross inequity. Certainly on its merits--and I’ve seen “Birdman”--Kolstad’s screenplay should have won the Academy Award that year hands down.

But I don't want you just to take my word for it. Here are samples of dialogue from Derek Kolstad's remarkable screenplay for the film "John Wick." Judge for yourself. John Steinbeck, Noel Coward, Raymond Chandler, and Derek Kolstad—it'll be obvious.

"I heard you struck my son."

"Yes, sir, I did."

"And may I ask why?"

"Yeah, well, because he stole John Wick's car, sir, and, uh, killed his dog."

"Oh."

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"That's a nice jacket."

"Thanks."

"Yeah." (Punches him in the stomach, he falls to his knees, vomits. Throws him a towel.) "Clean that up."

"What did I do?"

"You fucked up."

"We did what you asked. No one knew shit."

"I'm not talking about Atlantic City."

"What then? You mean Aurelio's? So I stole a fucking car."

“Ah fuck. It was John Wick’s car. John Wick is a man of focus, commitment, sheer will. I once saw him kill three men with a pencil.”

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“I want to ask you this. Have you returned to the fold?”

“Just visiting.”

“Have you thought this through? I mean, chewed it to the bone? You got out once. You dip so much as a pinky back into this pond, you may well find something reaches out and drags you back into its depths.”

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“Did you see the tits on that girl? . . . Are you scared of the fucking boogeyman? I’m not.”

“No? But you should be.”

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“I want another bottle! Right fucking now! Get me a bottle! Come on!”

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“Where’s Josef?”

“Bathhouse, downstairs.”

“You stole my car. And you killed my dog. Fuck you.”

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“Where’s Josef?”

“Fuck you.”

“Where’s Viggo?”

“I’m not telling you shit!”

“Do you really want to die here, Perkins? Give me something.”

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“It was just a fucking car. Just a fucking dog.”

“Just a dog. When Helen died, I lost everything. Until that dog arrived on my doorstep, a final gift from my wife. In that moment, I received some semblance of hope, an opportunity to grieve unalone. And your son took that from me--”

“Oh God.”

“Stole that from me. Killed that from me! People keep asking if I’m back and I haven’t really got an answer. But now, yeah, I’m thinking I’m back. So you either hand over your son or you can be screaming alongside him.”

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“Will you stop playing the fucking video game? Will you stop playing the fucking video game?”

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“Have you got my cigarettes?”

“Yeah, I got your cigarettes.”

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“Who’s that behind us?”

“Oh, fuck!”

“Shit! Goddamn, I knew he’d come.”

“What the fuck is wrong with that guy?”

“Somebody give me a gun. Who’s got a gun?”

“Oh, God! My fucking head!”

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“Go kill him.”

“Oh my God. Fuck. I need a gun.”

“Good luck.”

“Russian cocksucker.”

“Fuck.”

It’s been two years. Is it too late to draw up a petition demanding an investigation of the Academy Award nomination process in the screenwriting category that year, or picket this year’s ceremony, or start a “Derek Kolstad Was Robbed” web site? No, it isn’t. No, it

can't be. Whatever form it takes, and whether or not it results in remedying this terrible injustice, something must be done, and it must be done now.