

The Admirable Loyalty of Robert Downey Jr.



The other day, I was listening to the radio when I heard an announcer bring up the topic of a new “Iron Man” movie. Being that Iron Man was my absolute favorite superhero when I was a kid (I had at least 50 Iron Man comic books in my collection), along with the fact that I enjoyed the first three movies, I turned up the volume.

The announcer said that actor Robert Downey Jr. declared, in a recent interview, that he would only agree to star in another sequel to the popular film franchise if his friend, Mel Gibson, was allowed to direct it. I was intrigued by the premise, but what really got my attention was the announcer’s immediate, personal commentary on the story. It went something like this:

“Well if that’s the condition, screw it! Screw Mel Gibson! I hope he never works again!”

The announcer sounded legitimately angry, which struck me as a little weird. Then again, I suppose it reflected how a lot of people probably still feel about the troubled actor-director.

As you might recall, Gibson’s personal struggles became a huge news story back in 2006 when, after being arrested for a DUI in Malibu, California, he shouted sexist and anti-Semitic remarks at the arresting officers. Entertainment news obsessed over the incident, and Gibson was soon dropped by his talent agency. Hollywood imposed an unofficial blacklist on him which is still in place today. The result has been producers

refusing to fund his projects and directors refusing to consider him for quality acting roles.

Over the years, Robert Downey Jr. (a man who has had his own, well-documented history of struggling with personal demons) has publicly pleaded with Hollywood to give Gibson the same second-chance that they gave him. His loyalty to Gibson reportedly goes back many years, when Gibson took Downey under his wing and found him acting work at a time when a stint in prison and lingering substance-abuse questions made Downey virtually un-hireable.

Downey's remarks regarding Iron Man 4 were just the latest example of that loyalty. It should be noted that Downey is by no means holding the movie franchise hostage to land a job for his friend. He long ago made it clear to Marvel Productions (who are desperate to make another sequel) that he's not interested in doing another Iron Man film. It wasn't until the aforementioned interview, when the interviewer pitched the idea of Gibson in the director's seat, did Downey acknowledge that such a scenario would compel him to change his mind.

It won't happen though. Even though Gibson served the sentence for his crime, apologized profusely for his remarks, and has gotten himself clean, Hollywood has made it clear that they're quite content with treating him as an outcast until the end of time; this should at least make that radio announcer happy.

Normally, entertainment news doesn't interest me all that much. However, as someone who often feels compelled to write about blatant double-standards when I see them, the story of Mel Gibson strikes me as possibly the biggest double-standard I've ever seen in the entertainment world.

While no one would condone driving drunk and making bigoted remarks, Hollywood has forgiven far, far worse. We're talking about the same industry, after all, that has long supported director Roman Polanski, a man guilty of raping a 13 year-old

girl, and later fleeing the country to avoid going the prison for that crime.

In an industry overflowing with anti-Israel sentiment, and a long history of giving second chances to individuals who have suffered from substance abuse problems, it seems hypocritical that Gibson has been singled out.

Angry, vulgarity-laced tantrums and the degradation of others certainly aren't career-killers in Hollywood. Guys like Russell Crowe, Christian Bale, Alec Baldwin, and Sean Penn are proof of that. In 2008 and 2010, Charlie Sheen was even caught angrily blurting out the 'n' word in reference to African Americans, yet producers ignored it and continued to pay him close to \$1.8 million per episode to star in "Two and a Half Men." Sheen's peers were silent over the incidents as well.

In 2010, objections from the cast and crew of *The Hangover: Part II* successfully prevented Mel Gibson from having a small part in the film. Yet, the cast and crew voiced no such objections to letting convicted rapist Mike Tyson appear on camera in both the first and second *Hangover* movies.

What makes Gibson different than all the rest? I'm pretty sure I know the answer, and it has something to do with him being an unapologetic, Christian conservative who had the gall to create a purist, biblical film called "The Passion of the Christ" ten years ago. It was a project that the largely secular and progressive world of Hollywood wasn't ready for, and outright belittled. Every major production company that Gibson pitched the film to rejected it, despite Gibson having long proven himself as a reliable commodity at the box office. When Gibson went it alone, and the film went on to become one of the highest grossing movies ever, Hollywood held Gibson in great contempt. The result was him losing the industry's get-out-of-jail-free pass to screw up.

That's all the more reason why I've come to admire Robert

Downey Jr. After defying the odds and clawing his way to the top of his profession (in an industry than can pull the carpet out from under someone in a heartbeat), he's putting his own top-tier position in Hollywood on the line by sticking by his friend. Loyalty is an extremely valuable character trait, and if it eventually leads to one man being given a second chance to redeem himself and contribute again to the art he loves, I think that's a very good thing.