

# Downtown



## **KILLER** writer strikes again with another noir gumshoe flick — **KISS OF DEATH**

RICHARD PRICE is America's downtown dark prince and police afficiando. In his novels and screenplays, he has created a unique landscape filled with classic hustlers, heroes, losers, dreamers and the occasional sociopath.

His twisty, breakneck vision has brought us images as diverse as a dumfounded Ken Wahl listening to *The Times They Are A'Changin'* when

you know they never will, for him, in *THE WANDERERS*; Nick Nolte's explosive angst in *NEW YORK STORIES*; Al Pacino and his coterie of cops trying (unsuccessfully) to write a poem in *SEA OF LOVE*; Robert DiNiro repeating like a mantra Newman's Oscar-clincher in *THE COLOR OF MONEY*; the dueling, alienated personae of Rocco Klein, the urban enforcer, and Strike, the

urban outlaw, in *CLOCKERS*; and now, in *KISS OF DEATH* which opens April 21st, another bewildered standup heartthrob, David Caruso as Jimmy Killmartin.

Richard met me at the TIME CAFE in the East Village several hours after returning from the Scandinavian Film Festival.

### **"KISS OF DEATH**

came about because I owed Fox a movie," said Richard Price. "I liked the idea of taking *film noir* revolving around a moral dilemma and expanding it. The great thing about B-movies is that there is always an interesting premise, and the rest may be expendable."

"The original *KISS OF DEATH* is one of the all-time classic *film noir* movies. It's Richard Widmark's debut. He pushes an old lady in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs. In 1947, people were NOT doing this. Now it would be like a kid's movie."

"There's one scene in the original where Richard Widmark goes into a whorehouse on the Upper East Side. It's in a private brownstone. Victor Mature, who's just got out of prison — he's been in for like five years — walks into the foyer and says, 'What's that smell?' Widmark turns around and says 'Perfume'."

How, I asked, did he snag David Caruso, Hollywood's hottest, most speculated-upon commodity after his nervy exit from N.Y.P.D. BLUE?

"I have a history with him," says Price. "He was in *MAD DOG AND GLORY*. I had suggested him for that movie because I liked him in *KING OF THE CITY*. He was so startlingly real, with that pugnacious Irish cop face. He's a very intense individual in and out of character. He plays these righteous guys but he's got

# n's DARK PRINCE

## Richard Price

this beautiful Queens accent."

"I told Fox, 'I'll give you the first draft, and then you give the director the notes.'

"I always wanted to make a movie with Barbet Schroeder. I thought REVERSAL OF FORTUNE was one of the most startlingly perverse movies ever made."

I pointed out that Jeremy Irons, star of REVERSAL, had also starred in one of the other most startlingly perverse movies, DEAD RINGERS.

"Yeah," said Richard. "Jeremy Irons is getting to be the Dirk Bogarde of the Nineties.

"Universal bought the rights to CLOCKERS for Martin Scorsese. He was always a little hesitant about the project because it was a 600-page book. He spent a year developing the script with De Niro. It was good, but he ultimately pulled out to do CASINO and Spike Lee stepped in.

"Spike had all the drafts of my script. He said, 'No disrespect, but I'd like to write my own stuff.' It was clear that he writes what he directs. He kept all my choices, and then wrote on top of me.

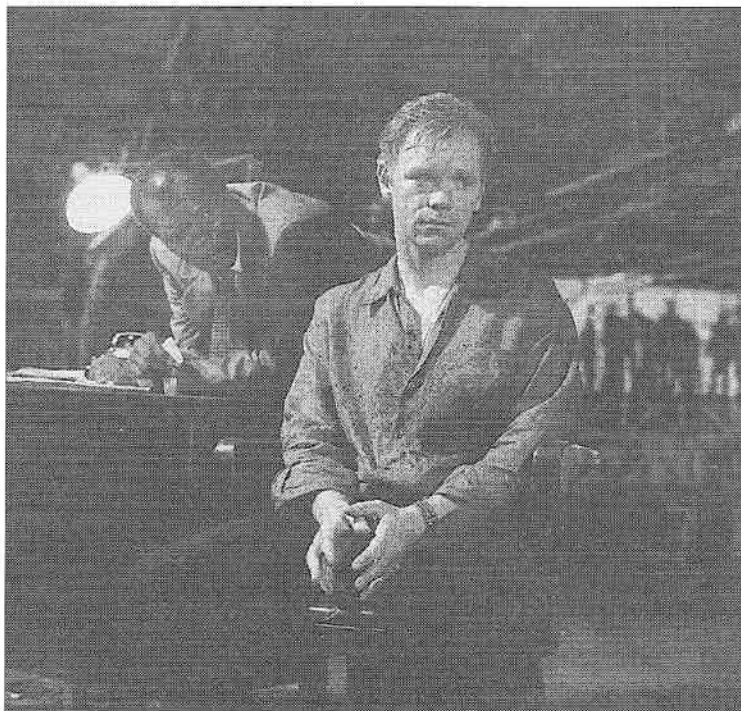
"We have very different sensibilities. Spike's a visual storyteller. He's got more of a throw-and-go attitude.

"KISS OF DEATH stars Harvey Keitel as Rocco Klein, and John Turturro as his partner, Mazzilli. Delroy Lindo, who was West Indian Archie in MALCOLM X, plays Rodney. Spike did a Starsearch thing and found a kid who had never acted before, Mekhi Pfeifer, to play Strike.

"Lindo is an unbelievably good actor. He's got a combination of

elegance and authority, and he's terrifically dignified."

"In CLOCKERS, Rocco Klein has this incredible ambivalence about fatherhood, but I can't see how a person could feel that way.



Samuel L. Jackson and David Caruso have it out in KISS OF DEATH.

"I'm always feeling like, 'I want to write this book, I want to make this movie,' yet this is my children's childhood, the most precious, intimate time I'll ever spend with them. I'm always wrestling with these two things. A lot of parents feel this way. My daughters are now nine and ten. They break your heart fast."

I asked how he had made such a fluid, even unprecedented, transition from novelist to filmwriter.

"I always wanted to write a big, social-realist novel like STUDS LONIGAN, NATIVE SON or CITY OF NIGHT. Writing a big, fat urban book felt like fighting the big fight.

"I grew up on t.v., so getting the hang of screenwriting was almost

too easy. Books are about language and prose. Screenplays are relative. Language is what people say. In screenplays, you say it quick and move on. Screenplays are about momentum, jump-cuts, and how fast we can tell this story without getting superficial."

Why the fascination with cops? I wondered.

"I started hanging out with cops in the late '80s to do research for SEA OF LOVE. I don't care if a cop's got a double digit I.Q. — just hang out with him for awhile, and eventually he's gonna get off a line that makes you fall on your ass because it's so funny.

"The Port Authority cops were really accommodating. The drug-dealers were too. It was so cool to have this guy hanging around, hanging on their every word. They were like, 'You wanna know about me? Well, somebody should write a moth-

erfuckin' book.' Well, if you were listening to what I said...

"I'm not into power, I'm not physically brave, I don't crave confrontation, but there's a part of me that wishes I was physically brave. It's been years and I'm still calling up some of these cops."

Then I scored my autographed copy of CLOCKERS.

— HARIETTE SUROVELL