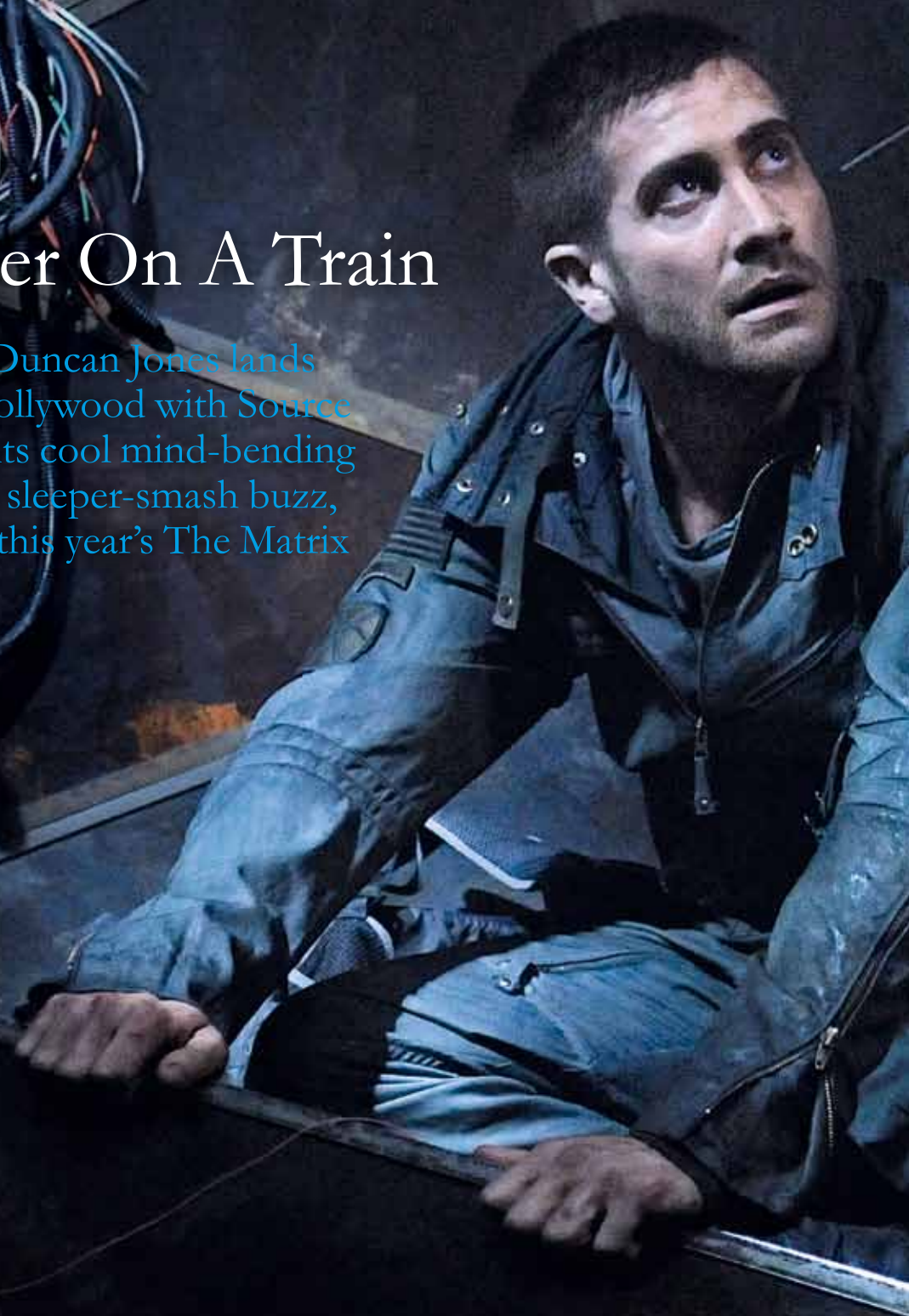


# Stranger On A Train

Moon man Duncan Jones lands on Planet Hollywood with Source Code. With its cool mind-bending concept and sleeper-smash buzz, it's set to be this year's *The Matrix*

Words: **Nev Pierce**



Jake Gyllenhaal and Michelle Monaghan with director Duncan Jones on set: "Dear diary, I watched *Prince Of Persia* for the 11th time today."

**W**hat are you going to do with your life? It's a question everyone asks but not everyone can answer. And it can torment you. At the 2010 BAFTA ceremony, one man had his choice validated. Moon director Duncan Jones accepted the award for Outstanding Debut with a speech easily the most touching of the night. "I didn't actually realise how much this meant to me," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "It has taken me an awful long time to know what I wanted to do with my life, and finally I think I have found what I love doing." On an evening of rather well-rehearsed spontaneity, it was a beautifully unaffected acceptance.

"I just thought, 'I'm not the kind of person they're going to give it to,'" says Jones, over lunch in Los Angeles during the edit of his second feature, *Source Code*, another cerebral sci-fi. "I still think of *Moon* as being a very cultish little film that has a very dedicated, but very small, following. And I was happy with that: I could live with that. So the BAFTA was just a massive surprise and yeah, it had a huge effect on me."

Scraggy-bearded and with smiling eyes, Jones looks a lot younger than his 39 years. But if he's considered an overnight success, it was a bloody long night. He had to make his name twice. First, literally, when he changed it from Zowie Bowie (his father is *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, David, who Jones credits for sparking his

love of sci-fi). Second, as a commercials and music-video director looking for his feature break — which he made when he and producing partner Stuart Fenegan put together crit-hit *Moon*.

Jake Gyllenhaal loved the space-set, Sam Rockwell-starring doppelgänger mystery and was already being wooed to star in *Source Code*, which he felt Jones should direct. Ben Ripley's script — which had landed a coveted place on Hollywood's 'Black List' of best unproduced screenplays — has a dual high concept: a soldier is sent back in time, into another's body, on a train that is about to explode. He has eight minutes, on each visit, to try and discover who planted the bomb, and thereby avert a future terrorist attack. On the page, in the draft **Empire**

# Source Code

**Released:** April 1  
**Director:** Duncan Jones  
**Starring:** Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Monaghan, Vera Farmiga, Jeffrey Wright  
**Story:** US soldier Colter Stevens (Gyllenhaal) wakes on a train inside another man's body. He's bemused... and then the train blows up. Turns out he's inside an experimental time-travel facility and must re-experience the bombing until he can figure out who did it...



Left: Vera Farmiga and Jeffrey Wright discover WikiLeaks is now following them on Twitter. Here: "I asked for the quiet coach, dammit!"

important for both writer and director than the obvious sci-fi elements. Jones recalls flicking through parts of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History Of Time* to re-familiarise himself with theories of time travel, while he also called on his memories of reading about the Milgram experiments during his (aborted) studies for a PhD in Philosophy. (These experiments, which took place during the '60s, were designed to discover just how far people would go in following orders, even if they conflicted with their conscience.)

Ripley relied upon his general background knowledge of sci-fi and the military, but more specifically on the experiences of a friend of his who is a helicopter pilot in the US Marines. "I was channelling him, more than time travel or things like that," he explains. "I really wanted the main character to feel and sound like a real pilot. He was in Iraq at the time, so we emailed back and forth."

Ripley's friend is now a pilot on Marine One, the helicopter which carries the US President — "The iconic chopper which lands on the White House lawn. It's a dream job for him!" Perhaps it's the reality of this relationship that gives Source Code its heart. Amid all the notes and clutter on his desk during writing, Ripley kept one line foremost in mind, as his inspiration, his guiding light: "You're writing a film about a soldier returning home."

If that sounds a little heavy, it's worth noting that Jones speaks of making the movie funny, lighter, more Hitchcockian in tone: perhaps more of a 21st-century *The Lady Vanishes*. "We did a little bit of work on it," he says. "But I think that's part and parcel of how films get made here (*in America*). It's different. It's just a very different way of



Gyllenhaal's Colter Stevens had just realised... he'd forgotten his Young Person's Railcard.

"I love the idea of a lost soul. Colter — who is our hero — is a bit of a lost soul." **Duncan Jones**

saw prior to further production revisions, it read like *Groundhog Day* meets *RoboCop*. "I think that's still true, to a certain extent," says Jones, who worked on the screenplay with Gyllenhaal after *Shattered Glass* scribe Billy Ray had taken a pass at Ripley's spec. "I love the idea of a lost soul. Colter — who is our hero in Source Code — is a bit of a lost soul and over the course of the film he finds out more about who he is and how he fits into the reality he's found himself in. I suppose if there is any kind of tie between *Moon* and Source Code, that's probably it. I think there's something very personal to me about that. Because, like I said in the BAFTA speech, it took me such a long time to work out what I was meant to do that I think I find those kinds of stories appealing — at least at this point in my life."

Curiously enough, a sense of discovering — or rediscovering — oneself was part of what drove Ripley to write the script in the first place. Making a living as an assignment writer (being hired by studios to script their ideas or do rewrites), he was surviving but dissatisfied. His only produced credits were TV-movie *Species* sequels, and while he was glad to be writing, it

wasn't on passion projects. "I was doing a lot of horror script rewrites," says Ripley. "I was getting paid for the work, but I felt like I had more to contribute. I started thinking about non-linear storytelling — movies like *Rashomon*, *Groundhog Day*, *Sliding Doors*... I really enjoyed those kinds of narratives and I started wondering if there was a science-fiction device or a conceit that would allow us to have that non-linear storytelling in a thriller context. So I just started playing around with it. There was a long period of evolution both working on my own and working with producers before we settled on the sort of eight-minutes-on-a-train idea. It was a tortuous process to get to the simplicity of what actually became Source Code." Originally, Colter's train journeys were each 17 minutes long, but that was compressed to increase the immediacy. And the locations were limited, which also brought a claustrophobic tension to bear. "The structure which finally broke the whole idea open was the binary back and forth between his experience on the train and him going back into an isolation chamber to be interrogated about what happened," says Ripley. "It was once I'd settled on that structure that the story could be written: it had a momentum of its own." The structure and the character were more

## The Good Word

Since its inception, the Black List has been a must-read guide to Hollywood's hottest scripts. Here are some done, some to come...

### Black List 2005

**Juno**  
 Diablo Cody's witty preggers-teen film arguably wouldn't have been made without the cred-boost of an entire industry's love. Went on to win the Best Screenplay Oscar.

### Horrible Bosses

Mike Markowitz's script has been revised several times and is out this year, directed by The King Of Kong's Seth Gordon. Jason Bateman stars.

### Black List 2006

**(500) Days Of Summer**  
 Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber's script snared attention with this disclaimer: "The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. Especially you, Jenny Beckman. Bitch."

### Hanna

The child-assassin thriller out this spring has Joe 'Atonement' Wright directing a murderous "fairy tale".

### Black List 2007

**Adventureland**  
 This fairground-set coming-of-age film was written and directed by Greg Mottola, thanks to prior Black Lister *Superbad*'s success.

### Farragut North

Beau Willimon adapted his political play, now rewritten by Grant Heslov and George Clooney and named *The Ides Of March*. Clooney is directing Ryan Gosling and Philip Seymour Hoffman.



working. There's a lot of heads involved in how films get put together, as opposed to when Stuart and I did *Moon*, it was basically me and Stuart and Sam Rockwell and that was it. So it's been... It's been interesting to learn that process out here and I think we've come up with something that works and we're still staying true to the original script, but hopefully Jake's and my ideas have also come out in it. I hope the Hitchcock elements of it come through, because that's what I think we're most proud of. It's got that quirkiness, that sort of serious thriller aspect but still all these little humorous moments, so hopefully the balance is right."

Ripley was aware of changes to the script as it went into production, and felt some trepidation about what might happen. "I was very nervous when I went to the set and when I watched the finished film that it somehow would be diluted," he admits. "And there was certainly a lot of work done on the dialogue by other writers, or perhaps by Duncan and Jake in the moment. So that was different. But what I found very gratifying was the circumstances were the same. It was still my story — these were my characters, this was my situation. So I always felt like it was my movie, even though it had passed through other hands and it was sort of shaped a different way. And everyone on the set was extremely gracious to me and always treated me like the author of the movie. That was a delightful surprise: these were people who clearly valued what you came up with. Duncan is very thoughtful — not domineering. I noticed on set he was extremely focussed on the actors."

For Jones, it was a new challenge. *Moon* was a two-hander... where both hands were played by the same actor. Here, while the situations were contained, it's not solely on Gyllenhaal. "I also have Michelle Monaghan — who is great fun. She's Christina, a fellow passenger. And then Vera Farmiga, who is a character called Goodwin, and Jeffrey Wright, who plays a character called Rutledge," says Jones, identifying the pair who debrief Colter when

he is not aboard the train. "They're all incredibly talented actors and all come with their ideas... I can't speak for other directors, but for myself, if you hire good actors: let them do it. If you're hiring incredibly talented people to do their job, let them do it the way they think it needs to be done. I really believe that a director's job is to get the best out of the people around him, not to impose his view on everyone."

Jones seems humble; wide-eyed, but not naive. Certainly filmmaking in Hollywood is quite different from his experience in the UK, but he lives in LA now, with his girlfriend (a photographer), and is enjoying the ride. He's wowed to be working with editor Paul Hirsch (*Star Wars*), who introduced him to another hero, Outland director Peter Hyams. "He was writing, down the hallway, and obviously in the press I was always going on about how he was such a big influence on *Moon*. Then, at random, Paul introduced me to him. I went all fanboy — which was quite sad to see!"

This casual serendipity is reminiscent of how Jones first fell in love with filmmaking: watching his father work on *Absolute Beginners* and Jim Henson fantasy adventure *Labyrinth*.

"I remember being on the set of that. It was massive. So much fun. I got to run around the goblin village that they built. It was vast — so cool! I remember, as a kid being able to sort of look at that and see how on a film you can actually create what's in your imagination. I think that had a huge impact. Being a kid in your own imagination is terrific."

His attitude brings to mind that of Orson Welles, who said during the pre-production for his ultimately abandoned adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*: "This is the biggest electric train set a boy ever had!"

"Exactly," says Jones, and laughs. "That should be the tagline for *Source Code*: it's the biggest train set you can play with!"

[nev@empiremagazine.com](http://www.empiremagazine.com)

**Source Code is out on April 1 and will be reviewed in the next issue.**



Here: Jake's hellish Virgin Pendolino journey got worse when he had to fix the train himself. Below: Stranded at Warrington Bank Quay.

**Black List 2008**  
**Up In The Air**

Jason Reitman's adaptation of Walter Kirn's novel went on to be an early Oscar favourite, before being pipped by *Precious* (not a Black Lister). Not too shabby.

**The Beaver**

Kyle Killen's striking script about a guy in therapy with a talking hand puppet is out this spring, with Mel Gibson going mad under the direction of Jodie Foster.

**Black List 2009**  
**The Social Network**

You might have heard of it. Facebook. Fincher, Eisenberg, Timberlake, Garfield. Awards aplenty.

**Cedar Rapids**

The Hangover's toothless wonder Ed Helms stars as an insurance salesman whose life is upended at an anarchic industry convention. The early buzz on Phil Johnston's script is very, very loud.

**Black List 2010**  
**Looper**

*Empire* favourite Rian Johnson directs his acclaimed script, with Joseph Gordon-Levitt trying to escape his future self (Bruce Willis) in a time-travel thriller.

**All You Need Is Kill**

Dante Harper's adaptation of the Japanese book is about a soldier reliving the same battle over and over again. Ryan Gosling may have been offered the part.



Duncan Jones (left) is unimpressed by Jake's belief that *Life On Mars* is overrated.