



## Jolie furthers the role of female lone wolf in 'Salt'

By Tony Hicks  
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 07/14/2010 12:49:10 PM PDT

Updated: 07/14/2010 12:49:10 PM PDT

Evelyn Salt was originally Edwin Salt.

But when Tom Cruise passed on the title role in "Salt," — a part reportedly written for him as a CIA agent who goes on the run after being accused of playing for the other team — producers gave the role to Jolie.

Many applauded the switch, not because Hollywood could ever be accused of affirmative gender action, but because there is a good chance it will make at least as much money. In theaters July 23, "Salt" will likely make more than it would have with Cruise, especially in light of the disappointing box office on his so-called comeback vehicle "Knight and Day."

But more significantly, and in a twist that many wouldn't have imagined 15 years ago, "Salt" will likely be just as strong a film with a woman in the role.

That's a pretty remarkable statement on the state of pop culture. Somewhere along the line in the past decade or so, most filmgoers stopped believing woman characters should be mere sidekicks and sexual playthings, at home minding the children in ignorant bliss while her man's out fighting overwhelming odds to make the world a better place. Now it's just pretty much old hat: Women play

strong, lone wolf heroes as well as or sometimes better than men, whether they're action figures or more traditional characters forced by circumstance into living on the fringes of the law.

"It's all about sexism finally breaking down," says Wheeler Winston Dixon, a professor

of film studies at University of Nebraska, Lincoln, who has observed "more women at the top in the film studios, more women demanding roles of substance." Furthermore, he adds, there is more desire on the part of the public for films that mix action and romance and feature self-reliant women charting their own destinies.

Though the female hero has become more popular and more frequent, the concept of a woman working alone to right perceived wrongs isn't entirely new. In the early '70s, Pam Grier was explosive as vigilante characters in "Coffy" and "Foxy Brown." In the '80s, Sigourney Weaver smacked around the monsters the men couldn't kill in the "Alien" franchise. In 1991, "La Femme Nikita," a French film about a female felon plucked from the criminal justice system and made into a deadly government operative, was popular enough to spawn an American remake and a television series. Quentin Tarantino revolved two hit movies around Uma Thurman's vengeance-thirsty killing machine in the "Kill Bill," movies, both of which were runaway hits (and whose cadre of villains featured women, played by Vivica A. Fox, Lucy Liu and Daryl Hannah, who were all nearly as deadly as Thurman's Bride). More recently, Jodie Foster protected herself and her daughter in "The Panic Room" and mowed down bad guys in revenge for her boyfriend's death in "The Brave One."

And Entertainment Weekly recently reported that the role every young A-list actress from Natalie Portman

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to Kristen Stewart is clambering after is that of Lisbeth Salander in the American remakes of "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" trilogy.

In the past, social expectations have kept women from these roles. But by the time "Kill Bill" came out in 2003, no one doubted Uma Thurman was trained well enough to really slice up some evil Ninjas. Jennifer Garner's physical prowess, both in television's "Alias," and the films in which she plays superhero Elektra, has always been credible. In September, Milla Jovovich will release her fourth "Resident Evil" film, a testament to her ability to convincingly play a snarling hero battling the forces of bad.

Even the younger girls are getting into the act, shown by 13-year-old Chloe Moretz's foul-mouthed assassin stealing every scene in this year "Kick-Ass."

Actresses playing lone wolf characters can also be seen as a reaction to the historical treatment of women in such movies as the "Twilight" series, says Debbie Mandel, a radio host and author of books mostly aimed at empowering women.

"Instead of serving as love object obsessed over and controlled," Mandel says, "a woman is now in the warrior role, expressing her primal feminine power."

As for "Salt," the title character's quandary directly relates to women everywhere — her identity as a female, Mandel says.

"This reflects our time period, as women tend to be overwhelmed and overloaded because they can accomplish on so many fronts," Mandel says. "As a result, they experience a form of identity theft and wonder who they are and where they are going with all this."

The idea of women as lone-wolf action heroes is still progressing. Even Jolie says that action roles that were once based on "fantasy" are now acceptable for the so-called "normal" character. Not that being a CIA agent is normal for most of us — but it's a lot closer to the ordinary than "Tomb Raider's" Lara Croft is.

"I've loved doing action films but for women, they're always based on fantasy. It's hard to think of one that's just a solid lead character, unless it's dramatic and about a struggling woman," Jolie told the Philippine Daily Inquirer. "I wanted the chance to be a Bond."

Jolie, who did almost all her own stunts in "Salt," recently addressed what happens to the script when producers flip the hero from man to woman. In this case, revisions left Salt childless.

"The big climax at the end was that (Edwin) was able to say 'I love you' to his wife," Jolie told the Philippine Daily Inquirer. "I said that if it's a woman, she would never have had a child in that (risky) situation. Also, for a woman to come to terms emotionally and say 'I love you' is not a surprise. So we had to get rid of both those things. That changed the whole structure of the movie."

Which leaves us with another surprising thought about how far women have come. There are rumors "Salt" may become a franchise. With the recent cancellation of the next James Bond film over MGM's economic difficulties, Bond, aka Daniel Craig, may end up wishing he were Angelina Jolie.

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