

## **“The Escape Agenda – Part II” (2014)**

Review  
by  
Chas Blankenship

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Written and Directed by Hector De La Rosa  
Produced by Anthony Gutierrez and Hector De La Rosa  
Based on Characters Created by John Carpenter, Debra Hill and Kurt Russell

Cinematography by Gayle Bykowicz and Anthony Gutierrez  
Edited by Gayle Bykowicz and Hector De La Rosa  
Bar Location Provided by Grip & Jughead from God’s Only Demons MC  
Escape From New York Theme Cover by Austin White  
Escape From New York Remix by Viking Guitar  
Original Escape Themes Composed by John Carpenter and Alan Howarth

Snake Plissken ... Hector De La Rosa  
Cyber Sally Callahan ... Gayle Bykowicz  
Bar Bouncer ... John Belegrios  
Apache Red ... Gloria M. Cabassa  
Rebel Laboy ... Himself  
The Russian ... Oleg “Drago” Boldyrev  
Cobra ... Juan Cordero  
Colo Nuts ... Walter Ospina  
WEPA City President ... Vick Black  
Russ Nuts ... Russell Forest  
Tuna God ... Izzy Quinones  
Bob Hauk ... Lee Van Cleef

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The mark of a hero is to present him or her with impossible odds and formidable obstacles and bear witness to how they overcome them. All eyes watch in awe as they’re put to the test, taken beyond the breaking point only to rise to the occasion, endure their challenges, defeat their enemies and walk off into the sunset to fight another day. What makes a hero is saving the day in triumph and to the cheers of those he or she rescued, maintaining a sense of optimism, courage and morality. But what makes an anti-hero is accomplishing the same feats without the same reward or moral barometer, deliberately flying in the face of such convention. In 1981, writer/director John Carpenter created one of American cult and genre film’s most iconic anti-heroes with the motion picture “Escape from New York” and it’s tough as nails, one-eyed cynic protagonist, known the world over as Snake Plissken.

But what is it that makes an anti-hero a man? What are the ramifications of legend? When all is said and all is done, who is the man behind the eye patch?

Filmmaker and Snake Plissken enthusiast Hector De La Rosa paints a wonderfully nuanced and modest portrait of the character with 2014's "The Escape Agenda – Part II," a sequel to his 2012 short film predecessor.

The short film finds Snake (De La Rosa himself) a year removed from the events of Carpenter's original film, tending to his wounds and exhaustion in the wilds of Canada and coping in the aftermath of his dramatic rescue of the President from New York Maximum Security Penitentiary. His only solace and connection with the outside world is Cyber Sally Callahan (Gayle Bykowicz), the last remaining comrade from Special Forces unit Black Light and the only friend Plissken's got in an ever changing, ever hostile world. Mulling over his situation, Snake takes up the call given to him by USPF Commissioner Bob Hauk and accepts the job offered to him at the end of "Escape from New York," setting to work searching for lowlifes evading their one way tickets to the Big Apple.

"The Escape Agenda – Part II" is admittedly rough around its edges, which can be expected given a production with a modest to minimal budget. However what the short lacks in superficial technical quality, it more than makes up for in creativity, ingenuity and sincere passion for the subject matter...or, more specifically, for the character himself.

The film, first and foremost, is a character portrait. Unburdened by unnecessary ambitions, De La Rosa wisely chooses to refrain from walking the beaten path of the "Escape" formula...a choice not even Carpenter himself made upon the production of the official 1996 sequel "Escape from LA." Instead, De La Rosa works with what he has...and he makes it work to the fullest. In a way, the short acts not only as a love letter to Snake Plissken, but to all heroic or mythic figures once they're cast out and forgotten. While the "Escape" films certainly have their fanbase, De La Rosa as a clear example, it's hard to argue the character's best days aren't behind him now that the long-sSpeculated remake is still in limbo and the chances of Carpenter and star Kurt Russell returning to the character in any form are pretty clearly nonexistent.

So for the short to deviate from expectations and present Snake as a living, breathing victim of abandonment...in narrative terms from his country and the establishment, but in meta-fictional terms, the abandonment of Snake Plissken from the sphere of contemporary pop culture...it's incredibly compelling. De La Rosa isn't just a passive fan of the "Escape" movies or a fan of the stylistic aesthetics of John Carpenter...he's a fan of the character himself, and it shows.

That creates a beautifully poignant opportunity that De La Rosa seizes by concentrating on the character not in the midst of action, framed by the narrative obligations of the "Escape" films proper, but by allowing Snake to drop his bad ass persona in favor of a more fleshed out, empathetic character. For all the gruff exterior fans know and love, Snake is made vulnerable and human in his recollection of Black Light's destruction. His body, weathered from the number done on it in New York, is betraying him with fits of pain and fatigue. There's a terrific scene where Snake is made little more than a fabled warhorse, telling stories of yesteryear by campfire with a genuine "in my day" attitude that, as stated before, breaks the fourth wall of the internal narrative itself and seems to make statements about Snake as a fictional character. In his day, Plissken hit a nerve with the American public that made "Escape from New York" a cult smash. But most people have turned their back on him in favor of other characters. Not De La Rosa, and not "Escape" fans either.

Of course the film is not without that aforementioned persona that Snake embodies. There are several moments of badassery that De La Rosa injects into the film, particularly by the finale when Plissken accepts Hauk's job offer, slipping back into the role as effortlessly as

pulling up to a bar on a Harley and putting out a cigarette in a drink offered to him, taking the entire bottle of Jack instead.

The frame compositions and overall narrative quality of the film are a quantum leap forward from the original "Escape Agenda." Gayle Bykowicz and Anthony Gutierrez, under De La Rosa's direction, show a vast improvement in concepts of shot compositions, scene transitions and editing. One of the most admirable qualities of the film from the beginning is its initial lack of dialogue. They understand that film is a visual medium first and foremost. Hallelujah! And to that end, they do a tremendous job of establishing setting and character in a purely visual manner. Sequences of Snake running and keeping himself in top form are interplayed with internal dreamscapes of the botched bank heist that landed him in the bus bound for Liberty Island and, ultimately, into a vivid moment of Snake visiting the grave of Taylor, his partner in crime from the original film's deleted scene that, while ultimately cut from "Escape from New York," provided the backstory of Snake's incarceration that fans are familiar with. There's terrific camera work in the veteran cemetery, particularly a wraparound shot that starts with Snake entering from camera right and pulls around his back to place him on camera left, revealing the rows of grave markers adorned with American flags.

There's also a wonderful footnote that De La Rosa and company provide by finally showing Snake without his iconic eye-patch. Again, this is a wonderful piece of humanization. That eye-patch is a major marker of the Plissken persona but by removing it, De La Rosa is inviting viewers and fans alike to connect with Snake on a more emotional and intimate level. The film isn't merely concerned with the myth but more so the man.

The cast works adequately given the material they have. Hector's passion comes full circle as he appropriately delivers the short's best performance as Snake and it's a testament to his love of the character that he takes the responsibility for portraying Plissken himself. He certainly looks the part and knows his own angles well enough to create close ups and moments that are iconic and worthy of the character and when it's time to rock, he's got the voice to pull it off. Everybody else fills out the cast just fine and that's mainly because, unlike something like "Escape from LA," De La Rosa isn't populating his depiction of the "Escape" universe with a myriad of less interesting bit characters or cartoonish villains. In all sincerity, I would've been much more interested in more Snake in that sequel than entire scenes devoted to Cuervo Jones, Taslima or Hershey... who all die anyway let alone barely register enough for even the most diehard of "Escape" fans to care.

Plissken is our main man and De La Rosa knows it, working that angle in a way that's clearly very personal to him while also maintaining the veneer and spirit that captured audience's imagination, as well as his own, with "Escape from New York."

"The Escape Agenda – Part II" is a terrific love letter to a bygone age not just of cult cinema but of heroes and anti-heroes and it clearly reminds us all that though they may disappear from the public eye or find themselves in more humble surroundings, they're never truly forgotten.

Here is a link to the original "Escape Agenda"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj1IHdgppRo>

And to "The Escape Agenda – Part II"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geSESsC1IH0>

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Chas Blankenship is a Creative Writing major earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts at Stephen F. Austin State University.