



MaHB

ESQUIRE INVESTIGATES:

The Next Action Star

But first, **PAUL SCHRÖDT** on anonymous leading men and the woman who will save us all

P Bruce Willis is John McClane. The smirk cocked to the right, the mix of vulgarity and patriotism, courage and panic—the traits of the character and the actor are inseparable. When *Die Hard* came out, Willis was a TV actor. He made McClane his own, and a five-movie franchise was built on his name. By *A Good Day to Die Hard*, in which Willis blows up Moscow in front of a green screen, he was the last remaining reason to watch. We're still looking for his replacement.

It's hard to find a candidate among today's young male actors, who tend to be as memorable and distinguishable as an individual laser blast in any one of their superhero spectacles. Does anyone really believe Chris Pratt sold *Guardians of the Galaxy*? We were relieved to have him, if only to insert knowing wisecracks in between spaceship battles against Goth aliens, but he was still subservient to the dancing tree. The action hero has undergone a weird gender inversion in the past decade—since Daniel Craig's Bond strolled a beach in short-shorts, becoming his own Honey Ryder. We're encouraged to take in Pratt's "transformation." Chris Evans bulks up before our eyes in *Captain America* and we think, *Okay, he'll work*. It's in the studios' long-term interest to keep focus on the franchise, not the man contractually obligated to fill it until the next reboot.

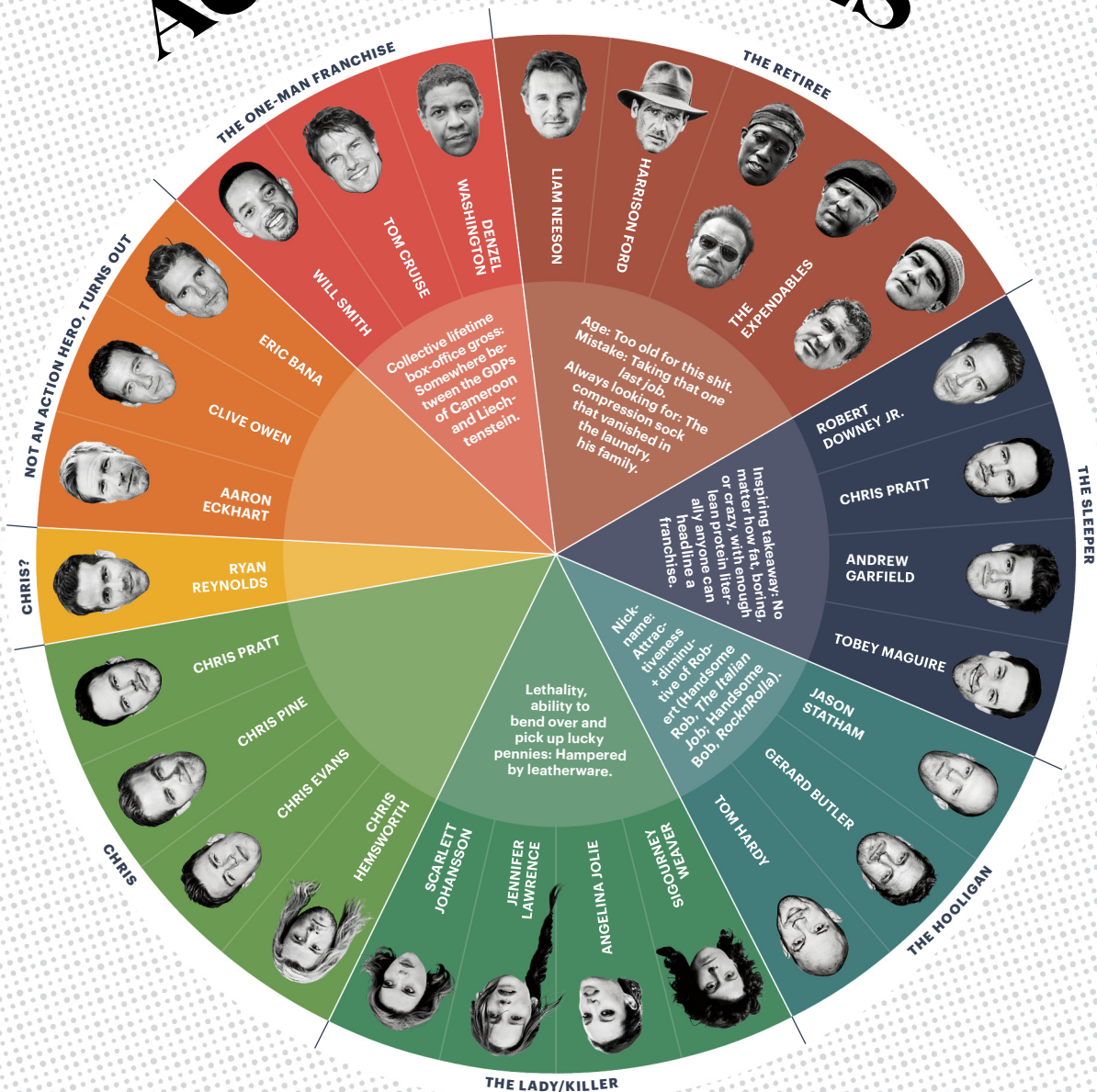
Which is why handfuls of us still line up to see—and enjoy, thank you—our old idols, Arnold, Sylvester, and Keanu, reviving their shtick in *The Last Stand*, *Bullet to the Head*, and *John Wick*. There is something depressing about Arnold tending to his physique at this point, but he still holds the camera with a presence and speech pattern entirely his own: There is literally no one else in the world even slightly like him. Keanu has long been mocked for his lack of versatility, but he has turned that into an asset: He wills every script to

his moody, dead-eyed delivery, which is all the better if you love Keanu. Matt Damon, possibly the last true action hero, is taking up the Jason Bourne mantle again in middle age because we have nowhere else to turn.

Except, perhaps, to the most promising emerging action hero, who is not a man at all. Scarlett Johansson starred as two killing machines last year, in the arty, abstract *Under the Skin* and the thrillingly stupid *Lucy*, which was the fourth-highest-grossing movie in America in 2014 not based on previous material. Besides being beloved, they share a shrewd exploitation of Johansson's off-screen persona: In both, she is an irresistible sexual and intellectual force who is just on the other side of knowable. Even as Marvel's Black Widow, she's manipulative and interior in a world of outsize exteriority. Her seductions are as much threat as invitation, begging the ultimate question about Johansson: *Could we handle her?* Next, she'll lead an adaptation of the anime *Ghost in the Shell* (out spring 2017), about an existentialist part-cyborg who mercilessly guns down her targets while baring her breasts. She may have found her John McClane. **E**

THE TAXONOMY OF ACTION HEROES

From Arnold to Zito



THE ACTION HERO MANIFESTO

An action hero has to be able to die. Gene Hackman could die, but it really looked like he didn't want to. Vin Diesel can't die. It looks like no one's ever told him about the possibility.

An action hero has to interact convincingly with normal-

cy. Children. Shopkeepers. Construction workers.

An action hero has a job. Not a quest or a calling. Not a mission. A job. A desk, maybe a parking spot. What's the first thing Ripley did after spending 57 years in hypersleep with a house cat? She got a job.

An action hero has to pay taxes. He has to be a citizen. He has to have some stake, some

obligation to the world. John McClane paid taxes, or at least he did going into the first *Die Hard*. Jason Bourne never received a W-2 in his life.

An action hero is not a superhero.

An action hero is not even augmented. Enough with implants, the suppressed memories of experimental training, the secret files in the brain. Bet-

ter the guy was a just a soda distributor in Spokane before this.

Because an action hero earns his abilities through his training, his past experience. He must exist in tension with that. It did some damage. It took some work.

An action hero drives a car. Always.

Even if he lives in Manhattan.

—TOM CHIARELLA

Esquire: The Thriller

Oscar-winning screenwriter Graham Moore imagined an action movie set at the Esquire offices. We were shocked by its accuracy.

BLACK.

JONAS (V.O.)

No one likes self-referential writing.

INT. ESQUIRE MAGAZINE OFFICES--DAY

The offices of Esquire magazine are bleeding-edge cool. Glass tables, matte-black chairs. Everyone is showing exactly a quarter inch of cuff.

The editor JONAS (40s) is talking to one of his writers, ROB (30s).

ROB

What are you talking about? That's the only thing everyone likes. Movies about movies; novels about novels; TV shows set behind the scenes of other TV shows.

JONAS

Magazine articles about writing magazine articles?
(Rob looks at Jonas suspiciously.)

ROB

...You didn't like it?

JONAS

I didn't say that.

ROB

You didn't have to.

JONAS

It was a little cute.

ROB

Cute?

JONAS

I mean, who would believe it? A top government assassin has a cover identity as a men's magazine writer who writes about...assassinations.

ROB

You don't think a men's magazine writer who writes about assassinations could have ever assassinated anyone?

REVEAL: Rob is holding a GUN beneath his desk...But Jonas can't see it....

ABOUT THE SCREENWRITER...

As the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *The Imitation Game*, Graham Moore managed to make an action movie out of, well, math. Sure, it was the math performed by Alan Turing that cracked a German code, thereby shortening World War II and saving millions of lives--but it was office work nonetheless. Really compelling office work. Which makes Moore well suited to authoring the script above and also providing insight into how to get us out of what feels like a hollow time in action movies. "*Speed* is a perfect screenplay," the 33-year-old says. "Keanu Reeves's character is not trying to save the world. The stakes do not rely on the audience caring about millions of people who exist entirely off-screen. It's very personal." Like Turing's story--even though he did, admittedly, save the world. A few more notes from Moore: Likable does not mean faultless; flawed does not mean tortured; the dead-wife gimmick is lazy; put some jokes in. Do that and even an office can become exciting.

--NATE HOPPER