

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Fourteen Degrees and a Six-Shooter: Zachary Levi Finally Gets His Western

On a Santa Fe set cold enough for hunting gear, director Julio Quintana, Zachary Levi, Neal McDonough, and Meg Fraser talk horses, mercy, and why Angel and the Badman had to feel like the West — not a costume drama.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Zachary Levi has been waiting on a horse since he was a kid. Not the movie-star version of waiting, with a wrangler and a call sheet already in hand. The real kind: a six-shooter, a getaway, bandits, gold, and a woman capable of wrecking the getaway. *Angel and the Badman*, Julio Quintana's reimagining of the 1947 John Wayne Western, finally puts him in the saddle as Quirt Evans, the outlaw who staggers onto a ranch with a bullet in his back and finds mercy where he expected a grave.

The film opens in theaters October 9 from Angel Studios. Levi plays Quirt. Meg Fraser is Penny, the rancher's daughter who offers him a life past violence. Neal McDonough rides as Laredo. Tommy Lee Jones is in the company as the law closes in. Quintana directs. Jaime Hernandez and Christopher Tuffin produce, from a screenplay they wrote with Kevin M. Townsend, built on James Edward Grant's original story. Paul Salfen sat with Quintana, Levi, McDonough, and Fraser as the picture headed for its wide release, and what they wanted to talk about was not mythology. It was the cold, the crew, and whether a faith-touched Western can still be a movie people actually enjoy.

A HORSE IN THE MIDDLE OF SANTA FE

The shoot landed in Santa Fe, on a Western street built to be used, not admired from a distance. McDonough, who has spent the last several years inside the genre, still sounded like a man who could not quite believe the day job.

"Dude, you sit on a horse in the middle of Santa Fe on this fantastic Western set and get to act with these guys and be directed by this guy here," he told Salfen. "It was one of the most enjoyable projects or processes I've ever been part of."

He and his wife helped executive produce. Hernandez, he said, "allowed us to have everything we needed to tell a genuine, authentic Western story." Then the veteran character actor did something actors do not always do on a junket. He handed the picture to the director. "Julio killed it."

"Julio killed it. We had a really lovely group of people, and that enables everyone to have a better time and make a better movie."

— NEAL MCDONOUGH

The rest of the company agreed, and not in the usual junket way. Late nights, long days, heaters, the huddle that either becomes a company or becomes a complaint. McDonough has done both. "If you're working with even just one bad apple, you're like, oh man, this is going to be forever, this is going to be a slog. But we had a really lovely group of people, and that enables everyone to have a better time and make a better movie."

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Fraser was the one farthest from her own door. Penny is the film's moral center — the woman who looks at a dying outlaw and does not flinch — and the actress playing her was on her first American shoot.

"I was a long way from home. This was my first project shooting in the U.S.," she said. "Everybody around us just made it such an enjoyable experience. Everybody was so kind and made everyone so safe. That's why you want to come to work every day, because the people you're with are excellent and they're brilliant at their jobs."

Safety, on a Western, is not a soft word. Horses, guns, weather, and a street full of people who have to look careless while being the opposite. Fraser's account matches what the men around her kept circling back to: the set worked because the people on it decided it would.

NOT A COSTUME DRAMA

McDonough has seen the other kind of Western. The one where the hats are right and the dust is wrong. The one that photographs like a pageant.

"There's this inherent importance to making a Western correctly," he said. "I've seen so many Westerns, and I've been part of so many Westerns in the last several years, that once in a while you'll see one that just looks like a bad costume drama. It doesn't really feel like the West."

Quintana, he said, refused that. Authentic picture, real horses, sets that hold up when an actor actually has to live in them. "You have the words, you have the costumes, you have the great horses, you have the beautiful sets and the director that allows you to play within the confines of all of that. What else can you ask for as an actor?"

The words matter here more than they do in a looser picture. Levi was plain about that. A comedy can be invented in the room. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* can be a whole series of invention. A classic Western cannot. "If you want to go make a great project, you want the words to be the foundation of what that is," he said. Grant's 1947 story — outlaw, Quaker mercy, a marshal, a gang that will burn what it cannot own — is still the spine. The new film keeps the redemption and lets the violence stay rated for it: PG-13, for violence and bloody images, suggestive material, and language.

THE WESTERN HE DREAMED ABOUT

"I've dreamt about being in a Western since I was a kid."

— ZACHARY LEVI

Levi did not dress the dream up. He wanted the six-shooter. He wanted the ride away from bandits and gold. He wanted "beautiful girls that you, as a bandit, then are falling in love with and transformed by, and this whole redemption arc." Quirt Evans is that arc. He expects to die on a stranger's land. Penny gives him something he has not had: a reason to be a different man before the past arrives to collect.

"It's got everything," Levi said. "It's a wonderful film."

The synopsis Angel is putting on the one-sheet is the same bargain. The marshal is closing in. An outlaw gang is ready to burn the ranch to the ground. Quirt has to decide what kind of man he is when the world demands blood. Fraser's Penny is the offer. McDonough's Laredo is part of the world that does the demanding. Jones is the weight in the frame that does not need a speech to be the law.

FOURTEEN DEGREES, NO CENTRAL HEAT

Quintana is the one who will admit the romance had a temperature. Santa Fe in the shoot window was not a postcard. It was fourteen degrees, and the barns did not have central heating.

“I think when I agreed to do this movie, I didn’t realize it was going to be 14 degrees when we started shooting,” the director told Salfen. “And I didn’t think about the fact that barns don’t have central heating. So I would say, was it fun? It was fun. It was in its own way.”

His own way involved Colorado hunting gear, camouflage over the director’s chair, watching actors in period wool who somehow stayed in a good mood. “I couldn’t understand why they were still in a good mood, because it was so cold, because they’re doing an awesome Western. So they were so happy. That’s why I realized the actors are just a different breed, man. They’re just happy to play and have a good time. They actually gave me the energy I needed. I would feed off of their enthusiasm.”

“The actors are just a different breed. They actually gave me the energy I needed.”

— JULIO QUINTANA

One day the snow arrived with the horse work. Somebody on that horse — the crew watching — went the other direction from sensible. Yeah, let’s go. Yeah, let’s do it. Quintana remembers the day. “That was a good one.” A Western that waits for better weather is a different movie. This one took the storm.

FAITH, WITHOUT THE LECTURE

Levi is willing to say the quiet part about the business he works in. Hollywood, he told Salfen, is in a dire place, and not only because artificial intelligence is “barreling down on us.” Too many films, in his view, have not been entertaining, have not been good, and have arrived “infused with a lot of agenda that is not necessary.”

He is just as hard on the other error. A faith-infused story can preach itself empty. “When you’re telling a story, by the way, that might be faith infused, sometimes people unfortunately stumble into the problem of being too agenda in that.” What he wanted from *Angel* and the *Badman* was the narrower road: faith in the grain of the picture, not a sermon pasted over the gunfight.

“It’s not heavy handed. It is not beating anybody over the head. It is really guiding people into an uplifted place and telling a great redemption story.”

— ZACHARY LEVI

That is the Quaker problem the 1947 film already understood, and the reason a remake is worth making. *Mercy* is not interesting if it is easy. *Quirt* is not interesting if he was already halfway to Sunday school. The transformation has to cost him the life that made him feared.

ABOVE THE ARGUMENT

McDonough pushed the idea past the church door. The movies he wants to be in, he said, are the ones that remember “what was great about us as a country, what united us,” the things that made the American spirit what it is. Not a campaign. A reminder.

“Try to remind people that there is something great that we all have in common, that is above politics and is even above our faith,” he said. “There’s something that we once called America, that brought us all together. Hopefully we can just rediscover the best aspects of that and unite going forward.”

It is a large claim for a Western about a wounded thief. It is also the claim the genre has always made when it is working: the town, the ranch, the law, and the man who has to choose which of those he belongs to. Fraser’s first American set, Levi’s childhood dream, McDonough’s impatience with costume drama, Quintana’s fourteen degrees — all of it funnels into that choice.

GO TO THE THEATER

Quintana closed on the room, not the algorithm. He picked up Levi’s point about entertainment and aimed it at the lobby.

“You want to make it entertaining. You want people to go to the theater. You don’t want them to sit at home and watch streaming services and look at films on their televisions at home,” he said. “By going to a theater, it’s a communal thing. Everyone talks about the movie after, whether you’re there with your whole family — which Angel is so good at allowing whole families to go and watch films together — or it might just be a bunch of buddies going to see a film.”

What he wants them to see is a Western that looks like one, and that asks a plain question on the way out. “How can I be a better person after I watch a film?” Escapism is allowed. So is the nudge. “That’s what we’re doing in films like this at Angel Studios.”

Tickets are up now at angel.com/badman. The picture is rated PG-13. It runs in the neighborhood of an hour and forty minutes, depending on which listing you trust, and it opens wide October 9. Bring a coat. The men who made it would understand.

FIND THE FILM

In theaters October 9, 2026, via Angel Studios

Tickets angel.com/badman

Director Julio Quintana

Producers Jaime Hernandez and Christopher Tuffin

Cast Zachary Levi, Meg Fraser, Neal McDonough, Tommy Lee Jones

Rating PG-13 for violence/bloody images, suggestive material and language

Also A reimagining of the 1947 John Wayne Western

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.