EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

You’re Hanging On to a Runaway Train.

John Malkovich and writer-director Martin McDonagh talk with Paul Salfen about Wild Horse Nine, now in theaters from Searchlight Pictures, and about writing so strong you hang on rather than push.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Official theatrical poster for Wild Horse Nine. From the Searchlight Pictures press room. The one-sheet lists a theatrical date of November 6.

John Malkovich has a simple test for a script. Some of them, he told Paul Salfen, you approach with a shrug and a question: let’s see what we can make of this. Others are different. You are not pushing the train up the mountain. You are hanging on to a runaway train. That, he said, has only to do with the quality of the writing.

The train in question is *Wild Horse Nine*, written and directed by Martin McDonagh and now in theaters from Searchlight Pictures after opening in the United States and Canada on November 6, 2026. Shortly before the 1973 Chilean coup, CIA agents Chris, played by Malkovich, and Lee, played by Sam Rockwell, are dispatched from Santiago to Easter Island by their bureau chief, MJ, played by Steve Buscemi. Among the island’s iconic statues, and as the longtime partners wrestle with their dark pasts and present conspiracies, Chris’s newfound bond with a pair of rebellious students, played by Mariana di Girolamo and Ailín Salas, threatens to send everyone’s trip to this remote paradise sideways. Tom Waits and Parker Posey round out the official billing.

The film premiered in competition at the 83rd Venice International Film Festival on September 3, 2026. Malkovich won the Volpi Cup for Best Actor, and later received a Silver Medallion at the Telluride Film Festival, where *Wild Horse Nine* also played, before a Canadian premiere at Toronto. McDonagh, the writer-director of *In Bruges*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, and *The Banshees of Inisherin*, is back with a company that includes Rockwell, his *Three Billboards* Oscar winner, and Waits, who appeared in *Seven Psychopaths*. Talking with Salfen, neither man sold the film as a struggle. McDonagh called it the most fun one he has been part of. Malkovich called the island a kind of paid vacation. The praise they kept returning to was the writing, and the work required to meet it.

NOT LESSER THAN THE PREVIOUS THING

Salfen asked what they say to themselves when it is go time, whether they are writing, directing, or acting, the kind of line that keeps a person on the path. McDonagh answered first, and he split the job in two.

“The writing of it, it’s sort of always the same, because I’m always on my own, and it’s always about trying to get the thing truthful, and also to not let it be lesser than the previous thing,” he said. “To try and keep a standard. In the directing of it, it’s a scary thing every time. You’re usually with a new bunch of actors, you know, one or two you might have worked with before. But so it’s always an unknown thing, which I find quite scary, actually, every single time. And it usually takes a week or two for the team to become a team, I think.”

The fear is useful, and it is not false modesty. McDonagh has a standard to defend. The last two features, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*, made him one of the more closely watched writer-directors in the English-language cinema. He won the Academy Award for original screenplay for *Three Billboards*. Starting again, even with a couple of familiar faces, still feels like an unknown.

Malkovich, who has spent decades acting, directing, and producing, much of it in the theater, then described what happens when the pages are good enough.

“I read a lot of scripts. I did a lot of producing, directing, mostly in the theater always, and a lot of acting in all kinds of places,” he said. “There are things you go, okay, well, this, let’s see what we can make of this. And then there are things you go, well, this we have to really do this well, because the material merits it. You’re not pushing the train up the mountain. You’re hanging on to a runaway train. That’s a very different thing. And that only has to do with the quality of writing. That’s my honest opinion. The rest, you’re just pushing up a hill. And some things you read and go, this is going to be a, gotta hang on.”

> *“You’re not pushing the train up the mountain. You’re hanging on to a runaway train.”*

The colleagues on this film, he said, addressed that fact by working very hard, and working constantly, “to do our best to ensure that the quality of writing was met with the quality of interpretation.”

It is the cleanest compliment in a short conversation, and it is also a working method. McDonagh writes alone, chasing something truthful, and trying not to fall off the last film. Malkovich reads the result and decides whether he is pushing or hanging on. On *Wild Horse Nine*, he hung on, and then he worked so the interpretation would not be lesser than the pages.

A SMALL AND BRILLIANT COMPANY

Salfen said the film looked like a blast to make, the exception to the old disappointment of arriving on a set and finding it less fun than advertised. McDonagh did not hesitate.

“I think this is the most fun one that I’ve been part of, because the repertory company of actors was small and brilliant,” he said. “Everyone was lovely. There was no ego. It was just everyone wanted to do a great job. From Mariana, who’s Chilean, so she had her reasons for this, the integrity of this coming across, to you guys working with each other. Steve coming in, Tom Waits, Parker Posey, like just proper actors who are proper nice people too. So it was really joyful.”

The names are the official company: di Girolamo, the two leads working with each other, Buscemi coming in, Waits, Posey. McDonagh’s mention of di Girolamo’s reasons, and of the integrity of the story coming across, is as close as either man came to the film’s politics. He did not expand on the coup, or on what the CIA officers are doing on the island. He credited a Chilean actress with caring that the thing be true, and then he credited the rest of the company with wanting to do a great job.



Director Martin McDonagh works with John Malkovich and Sam Rockwell on the set of WILD HORSE NINE. Photo by Searchlight Pictures/Diego Araya Corvalán. Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures. © 2026 Searchlight Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

That, more than a travelogue, is why the shoot sounds easy in the telling. A small company, no ego, and writing that required everyone to hang on, is a happier room than a bigger one with less at stake.

A FANTASTIC PLACE

Salfen turned to Malkovich and said the joy came through. Malkovich agreed, and then he talked about the island itself.

“Absolutely. And it was kind of a paid vacation in a way,” he said. “It’s a beautiful place. Very, very pretty. I loved being there and loved working there and seeing the island every day in a different aspect of it. Fantastic place.”

Salfen, thinking of the moai, the stone heads that loom over the official one-sheet and over Chris and Lee's assignment, said he felt as if he now had to go there. They were pretty impressive, came the reply, and they will be that for a while. There is time.



Sam Rockwell and John Malkovich in WILD HORSE NINE. Photo by Searchlight Pictures/Diego Araya Corvalán, Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures. © 2026 Searchlight Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

The remark is light, and it fits the rest of the conversation. McDonagh wanted the new film not to be lesser than the previous thing. Malkovich wanted the interpretation to meet the writing. The heads will still be there. The work, for a few weeks on Easter Island, was to hang on, to become a team, and to do the pages justice. *Wild Horse Nine* is rated R, for pervasive language, some strong violence, drug use, and sexual references, and it runs 1 hour 56 minutes. It is in theaters now.

FIND WILD HORSE NINE

In theaters: Now playing. Opened November 6, 2026, in the United States and Canada, from Searchlight Pictures, following a world premiere at the 83rd Venice International Film Festival on September 3, 2026.

Showtimes and official site: searchlightpictures.com/wild-horse-nine

Official trailer: WILD HORSE NINE | Official Trailer | Searchlight Pictures

The film: Written and directed by Martin McDonagh. Produced by Graham Broadbent, Pete Czernin, Martin McDonagh, and Anita Overland. A Searchlight Pictures release, in association with Film4, of a Blueprint Pictures production. Starring John Malkovich, Sam Rockwell, Steve Buscemi, Mariana di Girolamo, and Ailín Salas, with Tom Waits and Parker Posey. Running time: 1 hour 56 minutes. Rated R for pervasive language, some strong violence, drug use and sexual references.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine.

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.
