**James Franco On Adapting ‘In Dubious Battle’, Tweaking Steinbeck & Loving His Actors – Venice**

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[James Franco](http://deadline.com/tag/james-franco/) is returning to the [Venice Film Festival](http://deadline.com/tag/venice-film-festival/) this weekend with his most recent directorial effort, [*In Dubious Battle*](http://deadline.com/tag/in-dubious-battle/). The film falls in line with the multihyphenate’s penchant for adapting works by classic American authors, and after tackling William Faulkner, he’s on to John Steinbeck.

Originally published in 1936, *In Dubious Battle* is the least-known title in the author’s unofficial Dustbowl Trilogy — which also includes *Of Mice And Men* and *The Grapes Of Wrath*. Set during a Great Depression labor dispute, its 99% v 1% themes remain relevant today.

Franco stars alongside [Nat Wolff](http://deadline.com/tag/nat-wolff/) and an impressive ensemble cast that includes [Robert Duvall](http://deadline.com/tag/robert-duvall/), Vincent D’Onofrio, Bryan Cranston, Ed Harris, Sam Shepard, Selena Gomez, Josh Hutcherson, Ashley Greene, John Savage and Zach Braff.

Wolff plays Jim Nolan, a young recruit who joins Franco’s activist Mac McLeod to organize a group of California fruit-pickers oppressed by Duvall’s ruthless tycoon. The film chronicles their infiltration of the workers’ world, the ensuing strike and how they help and hinder the situation — and at what cost. Check out the trailer [here](http://deadline.com/2016/08/in-dubious-battle-trailer-james-franco-selena-gomez-bryan-cranston-nat-wolff-steinbeck-video-venice-film-festival-1201809815/).

Franco, who continues to straddle genres and media, says he chose the book after he had done *Of Mice And Men* on Broadway. The ideal medium for that, he tells me, is the play because of the setting and what actors can bring to a story that doesn’t move around a lot. Steinbeck, he feels, grew as a writer with both *Mice* and *Grapes Of Wrath*. But *In Dubious Battle,* which was written first, “shows him as more of a beginner, and in particular one of the things he learned how to do in the latter two books was develop character. There are indelible characters in the later books.”

Whereas with *In Dubious Battle*, the characters “are not as fully dimensional as the other books, but the situation is better for a movie” with the action moving around on a vaster canvas. “Steinbeck, by the time he got to *Grapes Of Wrath,* was doing a lot of research,” Franco says. “He was going out to these encampments. So he had seen by that point firsthand how horrible the conditions were and that people were being ripped off and all their wages were being halved. So by the time he wrote *Grapes Of Wrath*, he was fully on the side of the workers.”

With *In Dubious Battle*, it sounded “like he was going for a bit more of an even tone.” Franco’s movie version veers “a bit” from the book, especially the ending. He says the reason for that “was not to change the intention or spirit of the novel, but I really feel like Steinbeck just wasn’t on his sort of dramatic game as well as he was later in his books.”

Franco himself is surprised by the folks he was able to pull together in the cast. “When I step back and think about some of the guys I got in the movie, I think just ‘wow.’ It’s kind of crazy,” he says. “People like Robert Duvall are people I studied when I was in acting school, and they were held up as the greats of the profession. To work with them is a real honor.”

A shift since he began directing has been a bonus. “My whole attitude towards other actors changed,” Franco says. “Meaning, I don’t know, maybe when I was a young actor I was really competitive and it was all about fighting for roles or whatever. But now as I direct, it’s like I want to get along with every actor. I want to love every actor so they can be in my movie, and so whenever I work with anybody, especially people that I really respect, I try to stay in touch with them.”

NYU Film School also boosted his confidence. “When I first started directing, I was really shy and I was a little insecure about my skills. … Now I’m not shy about asking actors to be in my projects; the worst that can happen is they say no.”

This is Franco’s fourth movie as director to premiere in Venice. He says his long-lasting relationship with the festival “might be something to do with being in Europe that they are better able to allow me to be a director in ways that maybe are tricky for people in the States to do. I feel like early on they sort of got on board and were very supportive of the movies I was doing.”

He allows that the films are “of a certain type. I understand there’s not a huge call for Faulkner adaptations in the marketplace today,” he says, laughing. But, he adds, “I feel like I’ve been fortunate. And I think my team has been really good about putting these movies together in a certain way and at a certain price so that it can be really loyal to the novels and that’s really — changing the ending aside — I think we were very loyal to the spirit of *In Dubious Battle*.”

Franco has recently branched out into television, directing an episode of the Stephen King/JJ Abrams miniseries [*11.22.63*](http://deadline.com/tag/11.22.63/), and two episodes of the upcoming HBO series [*The Deuce*](http://deadline.com/tag/the-deuce/)*,* which he’s doing with *The Wire*’s David Simon.

He’s also just completed the Seth Rogen-produced *The Masterpiece* about [*The Room*](http://deadline.com/2015/10/james-franco-disaster-artist-movie-making-of-the-room-new-line-1201597623/), or as Franco says, “the best worst movie ever.” That project is “a very different kind of movie for me. It still fulfills my artistic ambitions. It’s about making things and it’s about art and all of that and it’s also got a different kind of commercial side to it,” Franco tells me.

Then, he adds, “I think the kind of stuff I’m doing is changing while I’m still also very interested in these adaptations of American classics. I guess you could just say I’m still doing what a lot of people say I’m always doing which is a lot of different kinds of things.”