FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES and FILM4
Present

A BLUEPRINT PICTURES Production

A MARTIN MCDONAGH Film

THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE Ebbing, MISSOURI

FRANCES MCDORMAND
WOODY HARRELSON
SAM ROCKWELL
ABBIE CORNISH
LUCAS HEDGES
ŽELJKI IVANEK
CALEB LANDRY JONES
CLARKE PETERS
SAMARA WEAVING
with JOHN HAWKES
and PETER DINKLAGE

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	MARTIN MCDONAGH
PRODUCED BY	GRAHAM BROADBENT
	PETE CZERNIN
	MARTIN MCDONAGH
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	DANIEL BATTSEK
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	BEN DAVIS, BSC
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	INBAL WEINBERG
FILM EDITOR	JON GREGORY, ACE
COSTUME DESIGNER	MELISSA TOTH
MUSIC BY	CARTER BURWELL
CO-PRODUCER	BEN KNIGHT
CASTING BY	SARAH HALLEY FINN, CSA

www.foxsearchlight.com/press
Rated PG-13 Running time 121 minutes

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THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI is a darkly comedic drama from Academy Award® winner Martin McDonagh (IN BRUGES). After months have passed without a culprit in her daughter's murder case, Mildred Hayes (Academy Award® winner Frances McDormand) makes a bold move, commissioning three signs leading into her town with a controversial message directed at William Willoughby (Academy Award® nominee Woody Harrelson), the town's revered chief of police. When his second-in-command Officer Dixon (Sam Rockwell), an immature mother's boy with a penchant for violence, gets involved, the battle between Mildred and Ebbing's law enforcement is only exacerbated.

Fox Searchlight Pictures and Film4 present, a Blueprint Pictures production, a Martin McDonagh film, written and directed by Martin McDonagh, starring Frances McDormand, Woody Harrelson, Sam Rockwell, Abbie Cornish, Lucas Hedges, Željki Ivanek, Caleb Landry Jones, Clarke Peters, Samara Weaving with John Hawkes and Peter Dinklage. The producers are Graham Broadbent, Pete Czernin and Martin McDonagh with executive producers Bergen Swanson, Diarmuid McKeown, Rose Garnett, David Kosse and Daniel Battsek and co-producer Ben Knight.

The filmmaking team includes director of photography Ben Davis, BSC, production designer Inbal Weinberg, film editor Jon Gregory, ACE, costume designer Melissa Toth, music by Carter Burwell and casting by Sarah Halley Finn, CSA.

THREE BILLBOARDS
Outside Ebbing, Missouri

"What's the law on what you can and cannot say on a billboard?"
~ Mildred Hayes

A last stand erupts in Martin McDonagh's trip into small town America in THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI, as a mother is pushed to the edge by her daughter's unsolved murder. The film is the third from Martin McDonagh, the Irish playwright, screenwriter and director known for the hit thriller IN BRUGES, with its Oscar® nominated and BAFTA winning Screenplay, and the crime comedy SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS.

It all begins with Mildred Hayes and the three billboards she rents on Drinkwater Road. "I decided the buyer of the billboards was an aggrieved mother and from there things almost wrote themselves," McDonagh recalls. "Mildred was someone strong, determined and raging, yet also broken inside. That was the germination of the story."

It was a story that would lead to Oscar®-winner Frances McDormand channeling a modern, female variant of the classic western hero in a showdown-style performance.

"I really latched onto John Wayne in a big way as my physical idea, because I really had no female physical icons to go off of for Mildred," she explains. "She is more in the tradition of the Spaghetti Western's mystery man, who comes walking down the center of the street, guns drawn, and blows everybody away -- although I think it's important that the only weapons Mildred ever uses are her wits."

"I could see it in her walk and her attitude," says McDonagh. "I think John Wayne did become a touchstone to a degree for Frances. But I also see Brando and Montgomery Clift in there, too."

Mildred marks the first time McDonagh has written a female lead for a film, but she is perhaps his most relentless character as well, an aggrieved mother without regret who comes to test the very fabric of her town. Joining McDonagh and McDormand in the ensemble at the heart of the film are acclaimed actors Woody Harrelson, Sam Rockwell, Abbie Cornish, John Hawkes, Lucas Hedges and Peter Dinklage.

THE SCREENPLAY

"I mean, to me, it seems like the local police department is too busy goin' 'round torturing black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving actual crime, so I kinda thought these here billboards might, y'know, concentrate their minds some."
~ Mildred Hayes

At the core of THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI is Mildred's conflict with Ebbing's Chief of Police. "The story is a war between two people who are both to some degree in the right," McDonagh notes, "and that's where so much of the tension and drama arises."

Those tensions become the exploration for what happens when rage can't be calmed. As the tension mounts, the film delves into themes of division, anger and moral reckoning.

Asks McDonagh: "Where do you go when you're in a place of loss and anger that's dead-ended? What can you do, constructive or destructive, to shake things up and get something done? It's an interesting idea to explore, that of what happens when there might not be any hope in a situation but you decide you're going to keep making waves until hope arrives. I think that's why this feels different from most crime films; there's the lingering question of 'what if there is no solution to this crime?'"

Perhaps McDonagh's greatest challenge was balancing the dark comedy of the story with Mildred's emotion-driven quest. He trusted that the humor would be there, black and biting, even as he allowed his characters to reel with anguish over loss, unfairness and the resistance to change.

"What's happened to Mildred's daughter is so sad and horrific, I felt the most important thing was to keep a rein on the comedy, even on the blackness, and make sure Mildred's struggle against the hopelessness of the situation maintained itself all the way through, tone wise," McDonagh says.

McDonagh's distinctive way of overlapping tones is something actors gravitate towards. Observes cast member Lucas Hedges: "Martin's dialogue is both fantastical and realistic at the same time, which is a dream for an actor. He writes emotionally honest text that is almost Shakespearean at times in how elevated it is." Adds Abbie Cornish: "There's something very raw about Martin's tone. It's not smoke and mirrors, but the opposite: it's just truth."

The film is, says McDonagh, the most tragic he has written so far yet it is also a search for hope. "The starting place is quite sad, but there's a lot of comedy in it and hopefully it's quite moving in parts as

well," he reflects. "I guess that's the way I see life. I see sadness in certain aspects, but my tendency is always to try to temper that with the bright side, with humor, however black it may be, and with the struggle against hopelessness."

For producer Graham Broadbent, who partnered with McDonagh on IN BRUGES and SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS, and produced the film with McDonagh and Pete Czernin, the result is a film that "walks a tightrope of comedy and sadness – and is narratively ingenious."

Broadbent notes that McDonagh's instincts kept him balanced. "I think it comes from Martin's days in theatre," says the producer. "On set it seems in his head he's already jumped ahead to how people will respond. With Martin, you know the words he's written and the performances he's going to get are all going to land with the audience."

MILDRED

"Jeez, then I guess it's just his word against mine, huh?
Kinda like in all those rape cases you hear about, except in this instance, the chick ain't losing."
~ Mildred Hayes

Playing Mildred Hayes, who sets the events of THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI in motion, is Frances McDormand. McDormand made her film debut in the Coen Brothers' noir classic BLOOD SIMPLE and has gone on to a career that includes garnering the Triple Crown of Tony, Emmy and Oscar® awards.

"I wrote Mildred for Frances," says McDonagh. "There wasn't any other actress I thought had all the elements that Mildred needed. She had to be very in touch with a kind of working class sensibility as well as a rural sensibility. She also had to be someone who wouldn't sentimentalize the character. All of Frances's work is fundamentally truthful. I knew she could play the darkness of Mildred yet also have dexterity with the humor, while staying true to who Mildred is throughout."

With the character, McDormand explored a tradition long reserved for men: the lone hero who defiantly stands off against a town.

"We never discussed any other actress," notes Graham Broadbent. "Frances got the script when Martin was ready to show it, she said yes and that was that. Martin wrote such a specific character in Mildred and then Frances came in and uniquely inhabited her. There are very few people who can run that full gamut of heartbreak and humor. Mildred can be pretty hard-nosed at times, but Frances was so tuned into her humanity that with just a few comic moments, the audience starts to align with her."

McDormand ran into McDonagh 15 years ago following a performance of his award-winning play "The Pillowman" and after briefly talking about his new film career, she suggested he write a film role for her. "As soon as those words were out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back because you're not

supposed to do that. But then 15 years later he sent me the script," she says. "I read the script, I loved the script, and I couldn't believe my great good fortune to be asked to play Mildred."

"Something I think Martin is really good at is an almost Greek idea of human existence -- there are so many epic, significant ideas he allows himself to explore in this story," says McDormand. "Then, by making his protagonist female rather than male he takes it into the realm of grand tragedy. He also plays with the modern revenge genre, but it's not a film about female revenge. By looking at how a female character seeks justice the story transcends gender to say something about the human condition."

McDonagh's amplified dialogue meshed with her own theatrical instincts. McDormand calls McDonagh's style "a form of magical realism, here mixed with a kind of Gothic Americana, based on the idea that people in small towns are not prosaic but poetic."

"Martin and I never shied away from the truth with each other, I would say anything to his face," she says. "Part of making the film was the combative nature of our conversations. We never went into a scene without me questioning some line or the motivations of the character. We particularly argued a lot about when Mildred wears the bandanna, which to me is a sign of her taking action -- I wanted to wear it a lot more than he wanted."

In addition to seeing Greek tragedy and magical realism in McDonagh's work, McDormand also saw THREE BILLBOARDS as a subverted take on the Western. She built Mildred upon the founding icons of the male-dominated genre, in part because she could find few examples of women in such roles. "In retrospect, I also thought of Pam Greer in the 70s, but that's not even right because Mildred doesn't use her sexuality as Pam did," she explains.

However, Mildred is not a gunslinger. She's a mother in search of justice for her daughter. "As a mother, you live on the edge of disaster, you just do," she describes. "I didn't give birth to my son, I met him at 6 months old, but from the minute I held him and smelled him, I knew it was my job to keep him alive. And as a parent, you also come to see how the worry and the anxiety that goes along with protecting someone who you give yourself to in that way, that you surrender to, can become degenerative."

McDormand made the force of Mildred's grief central to her performance. "Mildred is really not a hero," McDormand points out. "She's a much more complicated person than that. She's been left by grief in a no man's land, in a place of no return. One of the things I latched onto as I was thinking about Mildred is that there is no word in most languages for the position she is in. If you lose a husband, you're a widow; if you lose a parent, you're an orphan. But there is no word for a parent who has lost a child because it's just not supposed to happen biologically. It's something beyond the capacity of language – and that's where Mildred has been left, so she goes for broke."

McDormand was clear on one thing: "It was Joel [Coen, her husband] who said to me, 'a person doesn't become a hard-ass, Mildred was always a hard-ass.' Under the circumstances, she is now fully

exploring being a badass, but she would have always had that quality -- which I think also explains her domestic situation with her husband Charlie."

Also haunting Mildred are the off-hand remarks she made to her daughter -- wishing the worst on her the very day that she was murdered. "How do you live with that?" asks McDormand. "You can't and she obviously can't."

To McDormand, Mildred has no tears to cry at this juncture, which accounts for the depths of her mercilessness with anyone who stands in her way. "I believe that's why she does what she does: because she can't find her vulnerability, she can't access those emotions. It's much easier for her to throw a Molotov cocktail than to cry," she observes. "An image I had of Mildred's was the little Dutch boy with his finger in the hole in the dyke – if Mildred takes her finger away, and lets all the emotions out, she'd be completely immobilized. So her finger is staying there."

"With Mildred, I think you don't always understand her behavior, but you never hate her, you don't vilify her," McDormand observes.

Woody Harrelson, who plays Mildred's targeted foe, Chief Willoughby, observes that one thing that sets McDormand apart is her thorough preparation for a role. "Frances did the most painstaking work to understand Mildred, down to the whole backstory of her family and the daughter that we never really get to know because she's already dead when the story begins," he says. "As an actor, she operates like a private investigator. She comes in, finds everything she can out about her character and her performance really breathes out of that. Frances also has a wicked sense of humor, so she was able to take things that were already funny on the page and make them that much funnier still."

Says Rockwell of McDormand: "Frances is such a fierce actor and her particular mix of tenacity and compassion matches Mildred. She brings that fight-or-die quality. She's a pretty strong-willed person herself and like Mildred, she doesn't take any shit, and that comes across very strongly."

Though McDormand was constantly questioning the material, she and McDonagh agreed on how to walk the tightrope of the tone. "We were on the same page," says McDonagh, "in terms of keeping an eye towards never letting the comedy of the piece override the emotional place Mildred is coming from. We both felt Mildred should be free to rage, to be angry, to vent all she is feeling. Frances had a lot of different balls in the air, and she juggled all of them brilliantly."

Early in her prep, McDormand hit on an idea that soon twined with her performance: to have Mildred wear a singular outfit all through the film – a kind of unadorned, blue-collar regalia she dutifully puts on each day. "Frances came up with Mildred wearing the same jumpsuit every day as a kind of 'war uniform' and I thought it was a great cinematic idea," recalls McDonagh. "We worked with costume designer Melissa Toth to ensure the jumpsuit wasn't too one note, adding little touches to it here and there. But I liked the idea that Mildred doesn't have time to think about what she's wearing; she's at war."

Adds Toth: "Mildred is such a radical character the way Frances plays her and to her it was important to show that Mildred is on a daily quest that drives her from the moment she gets dressed in the morning. Sometimes she's wearing a bandana, sometimes not and at one point she even wears her gift shop smock over the jumpsuit – but the jumpsuit really was the part of the performance for Frances. Sometimes a costume can liberate an actor allowing them to fully commit to their character."

Toth was especially excited about the way the uniform became one with McDormand's ferocity in the role. "I love that Frances in this role sparks a very complex conversation about what kinds of roles women can and should inhabit," she muses. "There is nothing watered-down about Mildred."

WILLOUGHBY

"I'm doing everything I can to track him down, Mrs. Hayes.
I don't think those billboards is very fair."
~ Police Chief Willoughby

When the billboards go up outside Ebbing, Missouri, they appear to take direct aim at one man: Police Chief Bill Willoughby, who has failed to solve the murder of Mildred's daughter and left her with no solace. But the more one gets to know Chief Willoughby, the more it becomes clear that the man Mildred is going to war with is already fighting a private battle.

"Bill is a decent man who tends to see the best in people," comments McDonagh. "In many ways, he's the archetypal good, small-town cop – but we discover early on he's not in the best of health, and now he's facing up to some dark choices and dark realities. Mildred goes against him for all the right reasons, but he has his own good reasons to act the way he does."

Taking the role of the man who is both Mildred's sworn enemy and her only hope is two-time Oscar® nominee Woody Harrelson, seen also this year in the contrasting roles of a colonel fighting for humanity in WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES and an eccentric, alcoholic father in THE GLASS CASTLE. McDonagh has been friends with Harrelson for many years and previously cast him as live-wire gangster Charlie Costello in SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS.

"We see a different side of Woody in this film, definitely different to what he did in SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS," McDonagh observes. "This is a more honest, sadder and realistic character. Woody brought to it not only his great humor but a strong sense of integrity and decency. The decency of Woody as a man shines through into Willoughby and I think that's why it works so well."

Adds Broadbent: "Woody so often plays the outlaw or outcast – from NATURAL BORN KILLERS to RAMPART, he's usually on the wrong side of the law or in dark spaces. So what's intriguing with Willoughby is to see Woody playing a police chief with a really good heart, a guy revered and adored by his community."

Harrelson wasn't about to turn down the chance to work with McDonagh again. "I think Martin's one of the great talents," he says. "His writing is so fresh, alive and funny but with such pathos and you just don't find many screenwriters like this. He's able to capture things about human relationships and the human condition yet he's then able to get maximum humor, tension and emotion out of it, too."

One of the things Harrelson first latched onto for Willoughby was his ability to take all kinds of pressure without relenting to any of it. "He's under a lot of heat from Mildred and he's also not well, so he's got a lot to bear," Harrelson elaborates. "But what I find interesting about him is that he's really not an uptight guy. He's in the middle of all these cross-hairs but he just keeps going anyway."

Once the billboards go up, Mildred and Willoughby are in an instant standoff but they are not without understanding for one another. "Woody and I didn't talk much about the characters – we didn't have to," says McDormand. "There's something really similar about me and Woody. In fact, I think he could have played Mildred and I could have played Willoughby. And I think if there's anything approaching traditional sexual tension in the film it's between the two of them – but it's so much more interesting than that. They could have been friends, they could have been partners and in better circumstances maybe they could have found the answer together."

Harrelson also related to in Willoughby is his unwavering devotion to his family, come what may. "I related strongly to his need to take care of his kids and wife. And I like that Willoughby really doesn't dwell on his health problems," he says. "He's one of those guys who determines, 'I'm not going to stop living my life.' He just refuses to be hamstrung by it."

As the trouble in Willoughby's world mounts to a crisis, McDonagh gave Harrelson a lot of freedom to explore the emotional turns. "Martin's not a heavy handed director," Harrelson describes. "He'll come in with light notes -- but he sees very clearly and can do a incredible amount with just a small adjustment. He also has a real sense of humor about things. He's able to poke fun at me if I'm doing something that's too much in a way that makes me laugh, as opposed to putting me on my heels."

The biggest draw of all, says Harrelson, is McDonagh's way with characters who are more than they seem on the surface. "A great thing about Martin's writing is that he takes you inside characters who seem to be one thing until you realize there is so much more to them, and then you really start to care about them and see something other than what you first thought. In the end, that's how he creates something that truly stays with you," Harrelson sums up.

Chief Willoughby's wife, Anne, plays a key role in keeping Willoughby centered. Taking the part is Abbie Cornish, who previously worked with both McDonagh and Harrelson in SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS. That made their husband-and-wife rapport genuine from day one. "Woody and I are friends, so that made it easier to step straight into a close marriage," notes Cornish. "For me, a lot of inhabiting Anne was about being free in the role. Anne and Willoughby have a marriage that is very

evolved, full of love and admiration but they also enjoy taking the piss out of each other, making each other laugh and seducing the other. It's like the youth of their love is still there along with the timeless nature of how far they've come together."

Harrelson moved Cornish by where he took Willoughby, which only made it more natural for her as Anne to face her husband's decline. "As an actor Woody's very pure," she observes. "It was lovely to see him give Willoughby so much life at a stage of this character's life where things are pretty dismal. Fate is staring Willoughby in the face, yet Woody gives him vibrancy. It was also a joy because I never knew what Woody was going to do -- and to play husband and wife with someone like that is exciting."

DIXON

"You do not call an officer of the law a fing prick in his own station-house, Mrs. Hayes. Or anywhere, actually."***
~ Officer Dixon

Willoughby's right hand man, Dixon, is an officer whose potential is self-sabotaged by intolerance and a wildly erratic temper, usurping the chief's authority and order.

In the role is Sam Rockwell, who has brought a long roster of unforgettable characters to life, including playing Chuck Barris in CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND, Nicolas Cage's con artist protégé in MATCHSTICK MEN, astronaut Sam Bell in MOON, wrongfully convicted Kenny Waters in Tony Goldwyn's CONVICTION, Jesse James gang member Charley Ford in THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD and Billy Bickle in SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS for McDonagh.

"Dixon seems to be everything you would despise in a man," McDonagh acknowledges, "but there's something in him, and it's partly in the way that Sam plays him, which is childlike and moving despite all his obnoxiousness and horrible faults."

"Dixon may be my favorite character," Harrelson confesses. "Sam has a unique ability to play a guy where you sense there's something not quite right about him – and in fact a lot of what Dixon does is very wrong -- yet then he's got this redemptive quality. Sam as Dixon has an incredible innocence about him, so you care about the guy even when he's doing bad things. I think he's a terrific actor and it was great to work with him again."

McDonagh and Rockwell had worked together not only on SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS but also the play A BEHANDING IN SPOKANE, yet this was new territory. "I always think of Sam as my go-to actor for that generation," McDonagh says of Rockwell. "When he goes dark, he really goes dark."

Rockwell's versatility was especially welcome in a character who experiences profound shifts in the course of the film. "Sam was able to offer so much in his ability to riff with Martin," observes Graham

Broadbent. "They would try many different options again and again and again. And like Martin's writing, Sam can somehow be funny, tragic and sad all at once."

McDormand loved what Rockwell did with the character. "I think this is the best work Sam has ever done," she says. "There's a real synthesis between Sam and Martin as an actor and director who have worked together repeatedly and are just getting better and better at it."

McDormand continues: "Sam and I come from a place of deep respect for each other and getting to be in scenes together was so delicious. The choices he makes are so completely random and glorious and unpredictable– it's kind of like getting on a great roller coaster but not knowing when the hills and valleys are coming. I think he knew he had a kindred spirit along for the ride in me. We never went past the point of no return, but we were always kind of dangling out there over the edge of everything. And what I also love about Dixon is that he's allowed redemption, Martin allows him redemption, and he never, ever becomes a caricature. He's always something more than that and what saves him is his love for Willoughby – it's the tenderness between two men."

Like his cast mates, Rockwell was drawn to McDonagh's writing. Says Rockwell: "Martin is especially great in this script in dealing with taboos, racial taboos and other taboos, which he brings to the surface in so many compelling ways."

Rockwell observes that though McDonagh hails from Ireland, he has keen insight into small-town America, perhaps because hard-working towns anywhere have more in common than not. "Martin understands small towns because in Ireland there are all the same kinds of tensions. Working class is working class wherever you go, and he writes so well about that. I feel you could do this story with an Irish accent or a Brooklyn accent and it would work just as well as it does in Missouri."

Perhaps the local accent is inconsequential, but Dixon is certainly a character unto himself. "Dixon's kind of a classic," muses Rockwell. "He's like the bastard Edmund in King Lear in that he's a real angry, angry guy -- angry at the world and filled with this idea that he's always been mistreated. He seems at first that he's a kind of villain in Ebbing, and yet he's more complicated than that."

Ultimately, as Dixon's curiously co-dependent home life is revealed, the source of his psychic angst comes clear. "He still lives with his mom and he's a bit stunted, unable to just break free and finally become an adult," Rockwell explains. "He has an extremely dysfunctional relationship with his mom, which makes for quite a bit of trauma and then he takes that out on other people."

"I think we all can relate a bit to his anger and his sadness," Rockwell goes on, "and also I think to his hero worship of Chief Willoughby. I think a lot of us have felt that kind of reverence for someone and yearned for their approval."

Rockwell and Harrelson seemed to find an instant frisson that deepened the tricky bond between Dixon and Willoughby. "Woody's got a real moral compass and he's also very laid back, which makes

you feel at ease. With great actors like that, there's often a sense of anarchy and mischief, and Woody brings all that to Willoughby," says Rockwell. "His approach is never predictable."

McDonagh and Rockwell agreed that the glaring peril with Dixon would be letting him slip even for a second into caricature. His humanity was the crux. "We both knew Dixon had to be played real, and not for the jokes," says Rockwell. "Really, playing it too much for the jokes or too much for the pathos were equal dangers. I think in the end people will feel conflicting things about Dixon. I want them to be annoyed, angered and amused by him yet feel for him all at the same time."

JAMES

"I know I'm a midget who sells used cars and has a drinking problem, I know that. But who the hell are you, man? You're that Billboard Lady who never, ever smiles …"
~ James

Taking the role of James, a local with a flame for Mildred, is Peter Dinklage, a two-time Emmy winner and Golden Globe winner for his commanding role as Tyrion Lannister in HBO's GAME OF THRONES. Here he plays an almost polar opposite character as a blue-collar, used car salesman whose primary ambition is a date with Mildred. Dinklage recalls that his immediate reaction to the script was: "Martin has done it again. One thing about Martin's screenplays is no matter how small a part is, it is so well drawn. As you turn the pages, all the characters go deeper and deeper and that's as true of James as of every character."

Dinklage describes James as "a guy who doesn't have the strongest opinion of himself, but he's determined to win Mildred's attention." The role also presented Dinklage with a first opportunity to work with France McDormand. "She's the best of the best because she is completely without vanity," he observes. "She really is in at 100 percent depth the entire way."

Dinklage also enjoyed watching Sam Rockwell turn assumptions about Dixon inside out. "What Martin and especially Sam have done is call into question all your judgments of Dixon, and that's so satisfying. It makes your wheels turn as you find empathy for him."

As with all of the film's actors, Dinklage was especially drawn to McDonagh's agility with shifting the mood on a dime. "The careful balance Martin brings between the funny and the serious is something magnificent. I guess it gets to the reason people sometimes laugh at funerals," muses Dinklage. "In real life, opposing emotions often butt up against each other like that. When you suddenly experience humor after great tragedy, it's a great kind of relief and I think it's human nature to seek that. Martin can't really help but be moving then hilarious then moving again because that's the storyteller he is."

CHARLIE

"You don't have to explain yourself to me 'cause you're having dinner with a midget, Mildred."
~ Charlie

Mildred's ex-husband Charlie might share in her grief over their daughter – but that is where any sharing between them abruptly ends.

Equally full of agony and comedy, Charlie is yet another not-so-straight-forward supporting role. This led McDonagh to cast Academy Award® nominee John Hawkes, known for his intense but human performances in WINTER'S BONE, MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE, THE SESSIONS and HBO's television classic DEADWOOD. "John is only in a few scenes, but he has to blow you away every time, and he did that," states McDonagh.

Hawkes says of the lure of the character: "Charlie could be a completely unsympathetic character, which doesn't scare me as an actor, but Martin wrote him with such nuance that there are other colors and flavors in him. You see that some love still exists between him and Mildred, which you wouldn't expect. And Frances is so extraordinary as Mildred that she helped bring a lot of that out as well."

The anticipation of working with McDormand was considerable. "She's one of my favorite actors in the world, so it was exciting yet daunting," he confesses. "But she's such a kind, warm and giving human being and actor, I immediately felt welcomed. Sometimes in scenes I would get lost just watching her and then realize I was supposed to talk."

Throughout Charlie and Mildred's interactions there is the palpable specter of mutual abuse in their past. "I think Charlie might have drank and yelled a lot when they were together and, yet I think he also loved a lot, so it was never a black and white relationship, I like the gray area of things, and this film offers a lot of that," Hawkes notes.

Working with McDonagh helped Hawkes navigate those gray areas with focus and precision. He explains: "Martin doesn't guess as a director. He's very specific and Charlie is such a cipher, Martin helped me a lot along the way. I think because Martin comes from theater he brings a different kind of vibe, where there's more of a kinship and a communion with the actors."

ROBBIE

"As much as a person might've tried to avoid the details of what happened, cause he didn't think it would do any good, and he didn't think he could bear it, it's also good to be informed in 20 foot high lettering, and a real nice font, the precise details of her last moments."

~ Robbie Hayes

Dealing with death in his own way is Mildred's sole living child, her teenage son Robbie, who has come to find his mother's obsession with his sister's murder darkly funny. Lucas Hedges, fresh off his Oscar®-nominated role in MANCHESTER BY THE SEA, takes the part.

"I think Robbie has been going through a transition in his life since his sister died," says Hedges. "He was probably softer, more emotional, more immature beforehand, but I think you see him here coming into himself and getting a lot tougher. He also has an amazing sense of humor given how dark things are for him, and Martin loves to contrast humor with darkness."

Hedges suggests that Robbie feels slighted by how private Mildred is about their shared grief, and how little she has included him in her decisions. "After Angela died, Mildred went into a seven-month catatonic state, so Robbie was taking care of her in a way a child doesn't usually ever have to do with his mother," Hedges explains. "He has great love for his mom, but I think he feels lost because she doesn't ever talk to him about what she is going through or what her intentions are – and she doesn't even think to warn him about the billboards."

Perhaps Mildred's harshest effects are visited upon her son, Robbie, who she turns away from in favor of reckoning with her daughter's demise. "Mildred knows Robbie is capable of surviving, so he becomes collateral damage. She sacrifices him in a way," McDormand says.

That meant McDormand had to work in a very specific way with Hedges. "Before my scenes with Lucas I told him I'm going to be able to give you what you need when we're off camera, but the reality is that while we're in the scene you're not getting much from me because Robbie hasn't gotten much for the last 7 months. Mildred's been on the couch barely breathing and it's been like he's taking care of an invalid. And I know that was difficult for Lucas because he's a young actor who really wants to listen and respond but that's not Mildred. I could not give him that because she does not deal with Robbie anymore."

Hedges enjoyed the opportunity to learn from McDormand. "It was as if I was in acting school and she was the professor," says Hedges, who recently attended the conservatory at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. "I kept a journal that is just dedicated to things Frances said, which is going to be exciting to look back on."

As for what makes her choices so powerful, Hedges says: "There's no B.S. I never heard Frances say anything that she didn't mean. She will not even compliment you if she doesn't think you deserve it. She's kind but she's relentless. She's seasoned in the way Mildred is seasoned."

RED

"Ain't contravening no laws on propriety. Ain't contravening no laws on any fing thing. I checked all this up."***

~ Red

When Mildred Hayes decides to purchase three billboards to rile the police and entire community of Ebbing, she enters into a business deal with young Red Welby at the Ebbing Advertising Desk – a deal which does not bode well for Red. The role was won by Caleb Landry Jones, who made his film debut as a boy on a bicycle in the Coen Brothers' NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN, and was recently seen in the hit horror story GET OUT. Jones says the script hit him to the extent that "I would have played any part in the movie that Martin asked me to play."

But Red was a very distinctive kind of challenge, especially as he is lured deeper into Mildred's quest for justice, paying a price. "At first, I think Red just wants to look good in front of his attractive assistant and he wants the money, so he thinks, 'okay, crazy lady, I'll take your cash.' But as he finds out more about Mildred and her situation, it turns into something else," Jones explains.

Red is also one of the town's misfits. "Martin's idea is that Red just wants to get out of Ebbing one day soon and he expects he will get out--but I think maybe he might not," Jones muses.

In one scene, Red is thrown out of a window. McDonagh made the decision to film the moment in a single, ambitious shot.

"The window scene with Red was originally written into the script as a single take," McDonagh explains, "and it was always going to be a cinematic centerpiece of the film. We set ourselves aside a whole day to shoot it, then we prepared and prepared. We only needed I think to try it four or five times, and we were finished by noon. I don't know what we did for the rest of the day, probably drank and celebrated. There's something kind of joyous about a two-minute take like that where so much happens."

The wide-ranging cast of THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI also includes Samara Weaving as Charlie's barely post-adolescent girlfriend Penelope; Amanda Warren as Mildred's sole confidante Denise; Kerry Condon as Red's girlfriend Pamela; and Zeljko Ivanek as Cedric, the police desk sergeant.

Says Kerry Condon, recently seen in CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WARS, of Pamela: "Pamela is symbolic of the young woman that Mildred's daughter is never going to be. It's a very Martin thing to make an important character out of a person who only speaks a few times in the movie."

Ivanek, who worked with McDonagh in IN BRUGES, also relished his character: "I just love playing someone who takes his job so seriously even in a very small world," he says.

McDonagh rehearsed intently with the entire cast – except for McDormand, who came in only at the last moment on set, an idea that McDormand offered to him.

"It's kind of cool because Mildred is at war with everyone, so Frances had the feeling that it was better to explore those reactions spontaneously on camera, and I grew to agree, even though I didn't at the start," says McDonagh. "Working with the rest of the cast was almost like doing theater – we did a lot of talking about their characters and character choices. It's really a proper ensemble piece."

THE LOOK

"At least I've had a day of hoping. Which is more than I've had for a while."
~ Mildred Hayes

Though Ebbing is fictional, Martin McDonagh imbues the film with a deep sense of place – a place that offers the charms, but also claustrophobia, of a rural town where everyone knows everyone else's business and then some. He worked with a team that includes cinematographer Ben Davis, editor Jon Gregory, production designer Inbal Weinberg and costume designer Melissa Toth to create Ebbing as another of the film's vivid characters.

Davis has shot an eclectic array of films from BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL to GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY and previously forged a relationship with McDonagh on SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS. "There's something between Ben and Martin which allows Martin's words and brain to come to visual life," observes Graham Broadbent. "Ben captures the rural American landscape in a way that feels dramatic, while filming the characters in a quite minimal, yet emotionally striking, way."

McDonagh describes the photographic look as "something beautiful but not overly modern, overly stylized or overly saturated." He adds: "Ben and I are both fans of American '70s films so we wanted that feel."

Davis might have used the '70s as a general anchor for the film's look, but he notes that with McDonagh's work "there are no real reference points. I couldn't ever look at the script and say, 'Well, that reminds me of this film or of that image.' It's all so specific and so Martin."

Nevertheless, Davis drew subtle inspiration from the work of Stephen Shore, an American art photographer of the 1970s known for his depopulated landscapes and everyday still-life moments – a diner meal, a roadside billboard, a lonely motel.

He also spent lots of time in the film's locations absorbing the terrain and geography. "For me, it's all about camera angles, so I do a lot of prep. Instead of being stuck in the office, we'd go out and sit on the locations and I'd do lots of photographs to find the best ways to capture them," Davis explains. "I

became especially interested in the idea of one-drag towns and how they're photographed – and a lot of it was about choosing the right time of day."

That meant wrestling with shooting schedules, never an easy prospect. "I wanted to shoot a lot of the film in early light or at dusk, in the magic hour, but dusk of course is a brief period and we had so much dialogue in the film it was a real challenge for Martin. He and the cast would rehearse and rehearse, and then bang, we'd shoot it fast, hoping to get the performances -- and thankfully we did."

The film also features not just one technically challenging fire sequence, but two, both of which employed authentic blazes. "We wanted to do everything practically for the emotion you get from it," Davis explains. "When you have actual flames it impacts the actors in a way you can feel – they work off the power and heat of it. But of course fire takes an enormous amount of care and logistics."

Some of Davis's most exacting work came during the epic, uninterrupted, single-take window sequence in Red's office, but he says the shot was not done to be flashy.

"It's technically exciting to do a big, one-shot sequence, but you should only do it if there's a good storytelling reason to do it and it delivers something dramatically," he says of his ground rules. "I think this is a case where it does both things. Because you have no cutting, it becomes incredibly immersive and it feels like a journey with Dixon's character the whole way. The brutality of it is also all the more believable because there are no cuts to remind you that you're watching a piece of fiction."

Says Graham Broadbent of the continuous shot: "It's an important way of bringing the two worlds in the film together: the police station and the ad agency. It was enormously complicated because that single shot involves stairs, fighting, someone going out a window, more stairs, violence in the street and back to the police station. Ben and the whole team did an incredible job to make it so visceral."

Remembers Melissa Toth of the scene: "All of the department heads had a lot going on. In addition to everything else, Caleb had to do a quick change into shredded, bloodied clothes as he ran down the stairs, so my team was part of it, too. For me it was like watching live theatre. I actually got nervous and we were all just so excited to see it come off."

CREATING EBBING AND ITS BILLBOARDS

"How much these here 'Welcome to Missouri' rabbits go for?"
~ Crop-Haired Guy

Ebbing, a fictional town in the Ozark Mountains, has its own conflicted persona as a place that appears unchanging yet butts up against a modern world. While searching for a town to fit – trekking through Ohio, New Mexico, Missouri, Mississippi and Georgia – the production happened across tiny Sylva, North Carolina, situated amidst the Great Smoky Mountains.

"There's nothing about Sylva that hints that a dark story like this should be happening there," notes McDonagh, "and that was important: to have the town itself be a decent foil for Mildred."

The task of transforming Sylva into Ebbing fell to production designer Inbal Weinberg (BEASTS OF NO NATION, ST. VINCENT), who began by researching the visual history of America's heartland towns. Weinberg explains: "I looked at two different kinds of photography: documentarian photographers of the 60s and 70s who were shooting everyday life at that time; and recent photographers who are documenting vanishing towns. I was influenced both by the rhythms of daily small-town life and by the mementos of a way of life that's disappearing."

She then came up with her own mind's-eye vision of Ebbing in concert with McDonagh. "The idea is that Ebbing's not super wealthy but it's not busted, either," she says. "It's not gentrified but a town that is still hanging on, one of those towns that looks on the surface as it might have a half century ago, though there are signs of change; a town with a few rough edges but also a proud history."

With that in mind, Weinberg began combing Sylva for locations. "It was really important to Martin that everything be physically real," Weinberg notes. "In fact, Martin picked Sylva because it not only has a very classical Main Street but we also were able to mirror the proximity of the ad agency and the police department, just as it is in the script. One thing that is so strong in small towns is this feeling that people are so connected to each other's lives and it was really key to Martin to have that feeling."

Next, Weinberg began searching for the road on which Mildred rents her three billboards. The challenge was that McDonagh wanted Mildred's house to be nearby so shots there would frame the billboards hovering in the background. "We scouted so many roads," laughs Weinberg, "driving for days and days in gorgeous Western North Carolina."

As it turned out, the first road they visited was the one that most captivated McDonagh. "There was something so scenic and beautiful, but also kind of lonely, about it," he recalls. "And then Inbal and I started working on the look of Mildred's billboards."

Weinberg gave McDonagh numerous options. "I looked at every photo out there of personal billboards," she muses. "We tried different fonts, different colors, and different sentence placement. One of the biggest breakthroughs was an idea that Martin had – to use a red background from which the lettering really pops. When we tried it, we loved it, and not only was it a great decision but it led to red becoming a major accent color for the entire film."

The billboards go through six different phases of existence. "It was incredibly complex," Weinberg notes, "because these billboards are huge structures and not easily moved. We had entire meetings just devoted to scheduling the billboards." The production also finagled a means of covering the boards every night -- so as not to leave something shocking for the local community driving down the road.

Weinberg's designs spanned from the large-scale to the tiniest details of Ebbing life – she even found herself coming up with bumper stickers and high school mascots for a town that doesn't exist.

For the Ebbing police station, Ebbing and her team transformed a cavernous antique consignment shop. "I did lots of research on vintage small-town police stations," says Weinberg. "We knew we wanted a bullpen, even though modern police don't use them much, but in my mind Ebbing just never renovated. Then everything was fire-proofed, down to the floor, and our effects supervisor Burt Dalton worked with us to do burn tests on everything from the desks to the light bulbs."

For Red's office, Weinberg used a retro look. "I was inspired most by photos of ad shops from the 20s and 30s when it was all about traditional signage and that gave us the idea of using the walls to show off Ebbing's history, like the Bicentennial Train Ride," she explains. "We found old ad boards in prop shops and also sourced items from a local sign shop."

Weinberg kept Mildred's house in disarray. "It had to feel like the house of a grieving mother," she describes. "Frances had a lot of ideas we implemented. Important to all of us was that her daughter's room be the cleanest in the house. The challenge was to create a vibrant teen room that is full of absence."

One of Weinberg's favorite sets is the house where Dixon lives with his mother. "Martin had the idea that you could see the main drag from Dixon's porch – and amazingly, we found the perfect house just as Martin imagined it. It was a tiny, tiny house and hard to shoot in but Martin loved it so we made it work. For the folksy art pieces his mother does, we bought some wonderful paintings in the naïve tradition from a South Carolina artist and filled the house with family photos and yellowed, smoker's wallpaper."

Another favorite for Weinberg is the whimsical Ebbing gift shop where Mildred works. "The store was made from nothing and we had to essentially brand all our own knickknacks and souvenirs for a non-existent town. One idea we liked is that even though it's a gift shop, it's in a place that's not very welcoming. It's an isolated shop because Mildred is so isolated as a character," says the designer. (Also seen in the shop: rabbits, a running theme for McDonagh throughout his film career.)

No matter where or what she was building, Weinberg was gratified by how much the people of Sylva embraced masquerading as Ebbing. "The more we shot, the more super excited they got and started making their own shirts and memorabilia. The people of Sylva added a beautiful spirit to the production."

Meanwhile, Melissa Toth was outfitting Ebbing – from Red and Pamela's retro looks to the Ebbing Police uniforms. Toth has worked with a range of visionary directors including Michel Gondry on ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND to Kenneth Lonergan in MARGARET and MANCHESTER BY THE SEA, but she says even among that group, McDonagh stands out.

"His writing is really its own kind of animal," she reflects, "and for a costume designer the challenge of his work is that the way that people talk isn't always aligned with the way that you see them. My way of working with him was to just blast him with ideas and look for feedback. He would sometimes

give me one or two clues about the characters – such as a song they love – and I'd work from that. His storytelling is so intense, complex and dark but he's very breezy to work with. It's a rare combo."

While Mildred's jumpsuit is the central costuming piece, Toth notes that "the story is filled with zany characters, and it's a real ensemble piece. Martin's writing gives you room to play around. The world he creates is full of such depth and mystery, and there's nothing more fun than plumbing the depths of mystery in the character's clothing."

For the Ebbing police uniforms, Toth drew from research on rural police, focusing in on the emblazoned patches that make each unique. When Dixon is off-duty, she gave him a mustard yellow jacket which subtly mirrors that there's something off-color about the man. "We dipped and dyed that jacket to get it just the right color," Toth explains. "I loved working with Sam. He works so hard but when you see him in the role, it just looks effortless."

A favorite outfit of Toth's is a simple one: the light floral dress Chief Willoughby's wife Anne wears on their picnic and is still wearing when that day takes a turn. "The way Abbie wears it you get the feeling that she's making the most of every moment. The way it was flowing in the breeze during the picnic was just one of those moments when a costume was able to do so much visually."

When it came to the film's score, McDonagh turned to his regular musical collaborator: Carter Burwell, an Oscar®-nominee for CAROL, also recognized for his work with the Coen brothers and Spike Jonze. Reading the script, Burwell entered into the mentality of small towns where, as he says, "everyone knows each other from grade school and some of the same violence, prejudice and romance just continues on into adulthood." As he turned the pages, an array of musical thoughts swirled, from classical Americana to Spaghetti Westerns.

"I did initially have the thought of a Sergio Leone kind of score, because you have these very flawed characters seeking their own form of justice in a pitiless world," he recalls. "Ultimately, I didn't fully go in that direction but there remains a bit of that essence in there."

That the storyline was so utterly uncategorizable felt right up Burwell's musical alley. "I like working on films that are multi-dimensional and that is the best description of this film," he says. "In almost every scene where something is happening, the opposite is also happening … in a scene of great violence there is pathos and in a scene of great pathos there is humor and I think that's my personal strength as a composer. I enjoy working with the contradictory."

Burwell continues: "The most important thing I felt for the music to do was to keep you in Mildred's heart and on her side. So there are three basic themes in the score: Mildred's heart; Mildred at war; and death, which is a theme that surrounds not only Mildred's loss of her daughter but also Woody Harrelson's character."

He goes on: "I rooted all the music in American folk traditions, blending in a lot acoustic guitars, but Mildred's warpath theme is almost like a military march, with drumming and clapping and stomping."

But when Mildred's billboards are set on fire, that became the biggest compositional challenge for Burwell, who sought to mirror the drama without sentimentality. "It took a while for me to find that scene because I felt there had to be once a sense of urgency, but also an undertone of violence and a feeling of despair," he describes. "I used a mixture of mandolin, drums and strings and it was very satisfying the way it worked with the performances."

Burwell has developed his own way of partnering with McDonagh where they isolate themselves from all outside voices. "We work entirely one-on-one, which isn't always how it is in films," he notes. "We talk everything through just the two of us and no one else enters the conversation so it's an intimate kind of thing. For both of us, the focus was honing in on Mildred's mix of fury, warmth and loss."

That volatile mix – and the incendiary path it takes through Ebbing – is what makes the film what it is, says Graham Broadbent. "It was always a given that this story would be funny, because it was already so funny on the page and we had such terrific actors. But as we made the film, Martin was so careful to protect the beautiful sadness and the love of humanity in the film, and that's what brings it to another level," he comments.

For McDonagh, the trajectory towards a scrap of light, however slim and hazy, was inevitable because that is what keeps him going. "I think there's something quite hopeful about the film in Mildred's single-mindedness and also in Willoughby's decency," the writer-director concludes. "The way Frances plays Mildred you are stirred, despite the dark, dark place she is coming from and all the uncertainty that surrounds her war. I hope audiences will be moved and amused and maybe angry at times. Mostly, I hope they'll feel they were just told a rich and somewhat unexpected type of story."