
Liam Neeson's special set of skills has forced other ageing actors into training

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You can't really blame Liam Neeson. While male actors over 60 aren't always shy of work, they're rarely taking on lead roles in multiplex-dominating blockbusters, and they're hardly ever getting paid up to \$20m for it. So although reviews for *Tak3n* (pronounced Tak-threen?) might have been fairly brutal (it received a franchise-low of [just 10% on Rotten Tomatoes](#)), it proved that at an unlikely age, Neeson is still a major box office draw.

The film, which had a budget of just \$48m, made around six times that amount internationally, and the performance of the *Taken* series has given hope to both Neeson and other actors in his age bracket about the changing nature of the action star.

It's a shift that's led to success for Neeson outside his rather one-note revenge saga. The similarly marketed, if not plotted, thrillers [Non-Stop](#) (Taken on a plane!) and *Unknown* (Taken in Berlin!) both made a considerable profit; next month's *Run All Night* (out 13 March) sees him on safe ground, playing a hitman protecting his son from the mob (Taken with a son!). But it's not been quite so easy for his peers. Last year, [Kevin Costner](#) teamed up with *Taken* producer Luc Besson for *3 Days to Kill*, an action thriller which saw the 60-year-old aim to repeat the same formula with a plot that combined assassin antics with daughter drama. It failed to ignite though, with an underwhelming \$52m international box-office; Costner dropped his weapon and returned to the safety of the sports genre with *Draft Day* and the Dennis-Quaid-must-have-been-busy Disney pic *McFarland, USA*.

Pierce Brosnan's post-007 career had been largely action-free but he was lured back to the genre with [The November Man](#), a slightly more plot-heavy thriller than the majority of *Taken*-

alikes but one that still revolved around the familiar trope of a veteran agent. It was also ambitiously seen as a franchise-starter, with a sequel commissioned before release. Lacklustre box office numbers mean that this seems less than likely to see the light of day.

[Sean Penn](#) is also giving the genre a try in hopes of restarting his career, after a dreadful 2013 where he picked two stinkers in a row: *Gangster Squad* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. He's teamed up with *Taken* director Pierre Morel for *The Gunman*, a film where something something former Special Forces something something on the run something something clear his name. You get the idea.

If there was an award for sheer effort in the service of the older action star, then [Nicolas Cage](#) would run away with it, in slow-motion, while something explodes. Cage's CV bears a valiant number of one-word titled attempts, from *Rage* to *Justice* to, most laughably, *Stolen*. But there were few takers and, interestingly, Cage seems to be taking his acting seriously again, following up his impressive performance in David Gordon Green's *Joe* with roles in *Pay the Ghost*, the latest film from Uli Edel, the acclaimed director of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, and Oliver Stone's *Snowden*.

So what is it about [Liam Neeson](#) and his special set of skills that have worked so well where others have failed? It's not the ageing action star gimmick, that's for sure. Take a look at *The Expendables* films, which despite boasting bigger box office draws on paper, have actually grossed considerably less than the *Taken* franchise, with last summer's threequel proving to be a particular disappointment.

Even Neeson himself has suffered a misfire recently: his lead in *A Walk Among the Tombstones* resulted in a muted box-office performance. Despite boasting a [Rotten Tomatoes score that was double that of the last two Taken sequels combined](#), it didn't catch on. The slightly more sedate old-fashioned detective tale wasn't the fast-paced actioner his fans have grown to love and it will be interesting to see how *Run All Night* performs theatrically. It will be his fourth thriller in just over a year, and arriving just two months after *Taken 3*, it could prove to be too much of a mediocre thing.

It's something that Neeson appears to be aware of, as his upcoming slate suggests that, like Cage, he's edging his way out of the genre and giving his acting skills precedence over his ability to kill non-Americans. He's got a role in Martin Scorsese's latest *Silence*, a historical drama about religious persecution in Japan, and [he's suggested in a recent interview that he's eager to return to the stage](#).

So we can see that repeating the *Taken* formula outside films with the word *Taken* in the title is a largely fruitless pursuit. Neeson's frenetic Euro thriller was a mad fluke that, bolstered by his reliable screen presence, proved an audience favourite but it didn't change the rules. Outside the superhero and sci-fi genres (usually populated by those under 50), action is still a tough sell, at least if you're expecting anything more than solid ancillary numbers.

And that's just the men ...

- This article was amended on Thursday 26 February. We mistakenly referred to *Draft Day* as a baseball film whereas it is about the NFL. This has been corrected.

