

**FEATURES**

## 1917: Inside Sam Mendes' One-Shot War Film

We chat with Sam Mendes and makers of 1917 about their personal history with World War I and creating an uninterrupted one-shot film.

By [David Crow](#)

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Sam Mendes has always been intrigued by one-shot films. As eclectic a pair of directors as Alfred Hitchcock and Alejandro G. Iñárritu have tried it, and even before committing to **1917**, it was something he experimented on during the opening action sequence in his last James Bond movie.

“I did the first eight or nine minutes of **Spectre** all in one-shot,” Mendes says when we catch up with him at New York Comic Con. “And that gave me a bit more confidence that perhaps we could do this.” He’s been working toward it ever since.

Prior to assembling a script, much less a cast, Mendes always intended for **1917** to be a visceral look at the First World War through the illusion of an uninterrupted, continuous shot. That is how he initially conceived the idea of the film and how he began shaping it with co-screenwriter Krysty Wilson-Cairns after working with her on the Showtime series **Penny Dreadful**.

“The one-take thing was absolutely immutable,” Wilson-Cairns recalls. “It was there from the very first time he called me where he’s like, ‘Oh, by the way, it’s going to be one-shot.’ It was very intrinsic to the fabric of the story, and not just in a cinematic way, but a rooted in reality way.” She even adds that once they began writing, it became clear it was the only way to tell this story. “After the first draft, I knew the concept was going to work.” She then pauses before laughing, “So then it’s everyone else’s job to make it.”

Therein lies the tricky part.

Shooting in locations throughout the United Kingdom, from the southwestern end of England to the top of Scotland, Mendes and legendary cinematographer Roger Deakins create what appears to

be a continuous, single shot traversing a war-torn landscape that's filmed primarily in natural light. In this context, Mendes hopes to bring to life the century-old horrors of the First World War via two young British soldiers as they attempt to deliver a vital message that will save 1,600 lives in a matter of days. It is also the urgency and changing location that Mendes intends to use to differentiate his one-take film from the two most famous examples.

“*Rope* has its problems,” Mendes smiles when I bring up the Hitchcock film. “You could argue that Hitchcock is the best editor amongst directors there's ever been. Someone who was so aware of the power of editing, so it seemed a bit counterintuitive for him of all people to make a one-shot movie; the tension in the movie slacks off slightly because it's such a conventional thriller.” He conversely is quite impressed by Iñárritu's *Birdman*, even as he attempts something conceivably far more ambitious.

Says Mendes, “A movie like *Birdman*, which I love and I thought worked on every level, that inspired me... [but where this differs is] *Birdman* is going around within interiors and often returning to the same scene. This is very, very linear and traveling so much over different kinds of landscape, and so many different locations, and you don't know what's around the next corner, so the challenge is shooting exteriors and extreme conditions, measuring every set to exactly be the length of the scene, because there was no parallel action. I couldn't cut away to somebody else; it had to absolutely be the right length.”

NYCC (2019) - 1917 Cast and Director Interview

The result is that Mendes spent six months planning how the film would be shot, and rehearsing that with actors and Deakins, even before the sets were built.

George MacKay, who plays one of the two young men leading the film in an odyssey across French battlefields, describes the production as “the most mutual experience that I’ve ever had on a job. A scene or a shot can’t work unless everything’s working in harmony. And that gives you a real healthy awareness of everyone around you and by the same token, they’re aware of you. So there’s a real mutual collaboration.”

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Dean-Charles Chapman, meanwhile, plays LCpl Blake, who has an especially vested interest in their mission because among those 1600 endangered lives is his own brother. The emotional stakes of that were only heightened by the way the movie is shot.

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“This whole one-take thing really immerses you as an actor,” Chapman explains. “There was a scene where they called ‘cut,’ it was an eight-minute scene, and I couldn’t stop crying afterwards after the first time we did it. I just couldn’t stop crying, it proper got me, and that’s the brilliance of the one-take thing. It allows an actor to get lost in the scene and not think about anything else.”

Of course for Mendes and Deakins, it is not meant to be an experiment where they are unburdened by the need of shooting coverage—which in itself is its own challenge, as Mendes confesses he had to rethink entire scenes to get the proper close-up on a line of dialogue—but a chance to unpack the importance of the First World War in fresh way.

It was this aspect that most appealed to Wilson-Cairns, a self-described history nerd. The fascination goes back to watching World War I and II documentaries with her grandfather in Scotland and extended to having piles of First World War literature on-hand and in storage when Mendes first called. Yet to her it is about finding the grim origins of our own modern world.

“As Sam says, it starts with horse charges and ends with tanks, and it’s seismic in the world at large,” Wilson-Cairns says. “Everything from the women’s movement to the death of the British Empire, and the destruction of the Ottoman Empire is all wrapped up in World War I. So in a way, it’s a fascinating four-year slice of history in our world. And the other thing is it’s just out of living memory, it’s just out of reach, but there’s still so much out there.”

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Indeed, while Wilson-Cairns studied countless firsthand accounts of the war, many of her collaborators on the film have their own history with it. Producer Pippa Harris spent part of her 20s editing letters of correspondence between her own grandmother and poet Rupert Brooke, a legendary British writer known as “the Soldier” who died at the Battle of Gallipoli. And while **1917** is a fictional narrative invented by Mendes and Wilson-Cairns, it is very much inspired by Mendes’ own grandfather who fought in World War I and told his grandson many times about when he was required to deliver a vital message.

“There’s a good reason why Hollywood has been more interested in the Second World War and that’s because you guys fought in it,” Mendes says. “For us in Europe, it’s a significant cultural [event]; it’s an edifice that even people of my generation remember. We’re taught about it in school long before the Second World War, and there’s a reason why we wear poppies at certain times of year, and we lay the wreaths of poppies.” Hence Mendes’ hope that his intimate portrait of the war in microcosm, and as experienced over a few days by a few men, will cause a large audience to think about their own past. It affected star Dean-Charles Chapman, who told me about discovering in his research that his own grandfather was paralyzed for life in the war.

“I contacted my family members and asked them about my ancestors to see the story of it,” Chapman says. “And they said, ‘Yeah, check out this book, **Western Front Diaries**.’ It’s snippets of diary entries of soldiers of the war, and he’s known as David Henry Pierce, and he’s part of the cavalry, and he got shot in No Man’s Land and was paralyzed. And he survived out in No Man’s Land for four days and he survived the war, and he worked in a poppy factory until he died.”

It’s a story that made **1917**’s vision of apocalypse personal and relevant today. The movie will hopefully do the same for audiences when it opens on Christmas Day.

*David Crow is the Film Section Editor at Den of Geek. He’s also a member of the Online Film Critics Society. Read more of his work here. You can follow him on Twitter @DCrowsNest.*