

ART HOUSE | RICHARD JAMES HAVIS

Runaway Train

Oscar-worthy performances and edge-of-the-seat action make this visceral 1985 action drama well worth revisiting.

One of the most exciting action dramas ever made, Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky's *Runaway Train* (1985) marries thrilling locomotive sequences with Oscar-worthy performances from Jon Voight and Eric Roberts.

The movie was based on a script, written in Japanese, by filmmaker Akira Kurosawa for an American movie that fell through due to financing problems. An English version found its way to Konchalovsky and, although it was later rewritten, many traces of Kurosawa remain – notably the philosophical final scene, which transcends the tumultuous action to become a parable about the inevitability of death and how to face it.

Kurosawa got the idea from a newspaper report about a real incident that occurred in the United States in 1962, when four locomotives that were hitched together went out of control, leaving a solitary passenger to figure out how to stop them. Kurosawa then added a jailbreak to the story.

In Konchalovsky's version, Manny (Voight) and Buck (Roberts) break out of the remote Stonehaven Maximum Security Prison, in Alaska. The two convicts stow away on a train but the driver suffers a heart attack and loses control. With the help of engineer Sara (Rebecca De Mornay), Manny

and Buck must work out how to stop the train before it crashes.

Few special effects were used in the film, which was shot on Alaska Railroad, on adapted locomotives. Konchalovsky opted for a rough-and-ready look for the movie, and all the shots have a visceral, documentary edge – the viewer can feel the tremendous power of the train as it hurls the trio of passengers around the cabin, and the snow, wind and rain that batter the carriages seem genuinely threatening.

The director said a great deal of work had gone into ensuring the safety of the actors and crew, noting that he hired mountaineers to make sure they were securely strapped to the vehicle. There was, however, one fatality on the shoot, although it wasn't on the train – helicopter pilot Richard Holley crashed while scouting locations.

The performances are as good as the action – both Voight and Roberts were nominated for Oscars – and make what's going on inside the train just as exciting as what's going on outside on the track.

Runaway Train will be screened on Saturday and December 30 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Wan Chai, as part of the Critics' Choice 2018 – From Rails to Reels programme.



Jon Voight in
Runaway Train.