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adman. Murderer. Mental patient-cum-rebel. Bike gang member. Washed-up ex-astronaut.

Washed-up ex-lawyer. Washed-up ex-pianist. Vagrant. Cynic. Mafia hit-man. Jack Nicholson didn't just *play* these people. It's in the nature of the man that he *became* these people for the time required (and sometimes beyond).

So who is Jack Nicholson today?

Well, what's left? The Devil, of course.

"A lot of people think I've been preparing for this role all my life," he says of his allegorically demonic role in the film version of John Updike's **The Witches of Eastwick**.

"But I don't want to play him safely. I want people to think Jack Nicholson is the Devil. I want them to be *worried*."

Prepare to be worried. In a mere couple of tumultuous decades, the nitroglycerous Nicholson has gone from being a particularly earthy and eye-catching staple of Roger Corman's '60s "B" films to becoming the very definition of a modern method actor (not to mention one of the top-10 subjects for spirited North American conversation).

Which means, in order to do justice to the Pulitzer Prize-winning Updike, Nicholson has immersed himself in research in the most lofty subjects imaginable — life and death, good and evil.

"I read a lot of huge, studious books that deal with the Dark Ages," he told the *New York Times*. "One of the things I came across is the centuries-long debate about the definition of God. And the only thing they could come up with is that anything definite you can say about God must be supported by his paradoxical opposite (ie. evil or the Devil).

"(Thomas) Aquinas and all those people discuss this, but they never arrive at a definition of evil, which I found interesting."

There are no answers in Updike's **The Witches of Eastwick** either. The story of three New England women whose desperate wishes for male company are embodied in the unsettling appearance of a secretive and seductive stranger, angered both church groups and (if you can believe it) witches groups who claimed their methods and morals were misrepresented.

In fact Updike — a man of reputedly no small religious convictions himself — refutes both sides, claiming his book is nothing more than a parable capable of inducing personally subjective interpretations.

The same, hopefully, can be said about the movie, directed by Australian George Miller (of *Mad Max*

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

fame), a filmmaker known for action films who's now looking to render his portfolio more cerebral.

Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer, a trio of actresses capable of pretty substantial dramatic presence themselves, play the three repressed citizens of our fictional hamlet. Respectively they're Alexandra (a sardonic widow), Jane (a scared divorcee schoolteacher) and Sukie (a victimized, incredibly-fertile single mother).

Add to the picture a prim, disapproving woman named Felicia

Gabriel (Veronica Cartwright), who happens to be publisher of the tiny Eastwick newspaper. She clucks her tongue at the stranger a little too strongly, fairly daring the Devil to seduce her soul away too.

"I want to drop acid on the nerves with this role," says Nicholson, indulging in pain-filled metaphor to describe the approach he's taking with his sinister mystery man. "I've come up with a dynamic I think is devilishly clever. I'm going to impregnate this artificial world we're creating with that dynamic."

That's method-actor talk. Translation:

"I think I've come up with something so realistically evil, it's going to make you squirm in your chair."

"My first acting teacher said all art is one thing — a stimulating point of departure. That's it," says Nicholson. "And if you can do that in a piece, you've fulfilled your cultural, sociological obligation as a workman."

Call it the method actor's work ethic. And if you fall short, there's the Devil to pay.

— Jim Slotek

