

# Chinatown to get a prequel



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When someone mentions Chinatown, one immediately thinks of the numerous Chinatowns all over the world. There is one in Kolkata; there is one in New York; and there are so many more in different cities around the world.

But *Chinatown* is also a great film that first opened in June 1974. In its five decades, it has merely gone on to become a great, great classic, its spirit enduringly loveable, much like *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Roman Holiday* and *Ben-Hur*.

Directed by Roman Polanski, *Chinatown's* legend also stems from its great star cast—Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. He plays a Los Angeles private detective Jake Gittes and is hired by Evelyn Mulwray to spy on her husband's philandering ways. Gittes feels that it is a routine, open-and-shut case, but when he runs into the real Evelyn Mulwray (Dunaway), he realises that he has been taken for a ride by an imposter. Mr Mulwray's sudden death pushes the detective into a web of deceit, corruption and sinister secrets. And Evelyn's father becomes a prime suspect.

The movie became a money spinner for Paramount, a much-celebrated return to Hollywood for Polanski after the various charges of sexual misdemeanours he faced, and an Academy Award winner for screenplay writer Robert Towne. It also fetched Oscar nods for Nicholson and Dunaway.

Much like *Casablanca* (with Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart, both of whom had the most memorable lines that have been enshrined in the annals of cinematic history), where the makers were unsure how to end it, so too was Towne. He wanted a grander exit for Gittes and was also against him returning to Chinatown, where he ran into another mysterious happening.

But there has been a change in this thinking now. Towne, now in his eighties, is working with American auteur David Fincher on a prequel series for Netflix. Gittes would be back in Chinatown, but we are not sure who would replace Nicholson.

However, the episodes have all been written.

The prequel follows a young Gittes and partner Lou Escobar as they patrol Chinatown, and then a tragedy happens. "Chinatown, with all its implications for an evolving Los Angeles, is central to understanding the evolving Jake Gittes, as is his friendship with and dependence on his partner Lou Escobar," Towne said in a recent interview. "It was enlightening to delve into their backstory, Escobar's in particular. Small details that are touched on in the film are given life and breath in a way that surprised even me."

"I'm fond of the prequel that places Gittes newly in Los Angeles... It is to this young Jake Gittes that I am particularly drawn," Towne continues. "Because for all his bravado — his not playing by the rules, his penchant to be in charge — he controls events far less than events control him. And by the time he figures it out, it's much too late to do anything about it, which seems to me the plight of the very young and the very old", Towne affirmed.

"When David and I first started talking, we agreed we wouldn't try to replicate Noah Cross," Towne said about the villain of the series. "But we did want to keep in mind that the crimes that history considers monstrous are those that will not remain in the past but insist on visiting the future, and I think we managed that."

What is also interesting is how Nicholson's personality was a huge influence on the way Gittes was written. Towne and Nicholson had been friends since the late 1950s, when they first met in an acting class. They stayed as roommates, and their association helped Towne write the script for Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail*, which gave Nicholson his most memorable role ever!

Towne once said that the moment he met Nicholson, he knew that the actor had great star qualities. And he could not think of anybody else essaying Gittes.

*Chinatown* is now available in Blu-ray.

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