

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ANG LEE AND JAMES SCHAMUS

Ang Lee emigrated from Taiwan to America to make films. He has worked in a wide range of genres, moving fluidly between arthouse and mainstream filmmaking. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the most successful foreign-language film ever released in the United States, and *Brokeback Mountain* earned Lee an Academy Award for Best Director. One of the keys to Lee's accomplishments is his creative partnership with James Schamus, president of Focus Features, who has co-written and/or co-produced all of Lee's films. Lee and Schamus spoke at the Museum before the release of their live-action comic-book blockbuster *The Hulk*.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (June 7, 2003):

SCHWARTZ: So please welcome Ang Lee and James Schamus. (Applause)

LEE: Thank you.

SCHWARTZ: I appreciate your being here, because I know you just got into town yesterday, and you've been finishing up...

LEE: Yeah, I'm still in the process of *de-Hulking*. Forgive me if I don't make any sense, or...

SCHWARTZ: What was the production like? It's not a small film, is it?

LEE: It's big.

SCHWARTZ: What was it like physically, and what was it like working on a film that involved a lot of special effects?

LEE: It was definitely something I've never experienced before, and probably nobody experienced before, because I was trying to bring a small movie to a big-time, big kind of filmmaking. So in one way, I had to learn a lot about how big movies are made; and at the same time, James, me, Tim Squyres (my editor), the usual suspects, still had to go west and try to exert our powers.

SCHWARTZ: And I'm just wondering if you could talk about what your approach was to this material. When it was first announced, after the success of *Crouching Tiger*, that you were going to do *The Hulk*, there was a little bit of surprise, to say the least.

LEE: He [James Schamus] told me to do it. They were out of scripts.

SCHWARTZ: But you don't do whatever he says, right? (Laughter)

LEE: Well, I was trying to do a big movie on our own terms, so that's the thing: do a personal movie with the biceps, so to speak, [that] I have never used. So there were things offered to me, this and that, and [I wanted to] try to do a big budget film, but something with—as Hollywood put it—with big heart. I don't want to call it that...but personal. And James [Schamus] mailed this project from Universal, who we had a relationship [with] in *Ride with the Devil*. So he pitched me. He said, "*The Hulk*, what do you think about *The Hulk*?" I said, "I know it's from a TV series." I never read the comic book. And he said, "He jumps very high, and he weighs anywhere from two thousand pounds to two thousand fifty pounds. And he's green, and..." It started to click. He says, "Look, it's a franchise movie; you don't have to use a big movie star." And then it clicked some more. So it didn't take a very long time for us to jump in.

So to me, it's the new [*Crouching Tiger*,] *Hidden Dragon*. I don't know what James makes of it, but

he sort of pitched me the ideas, and... Then we started work on the movie that summer. It was a very long process. The production was pretty overwhelming. It was a good exercise in how to make movies. So it was so great. Big movies are supposed to have certain elements; I tried to insert that. It was hard for us to execute it, and then, three months ago, the reality started to inch in; pressures started coming. And it was tremendous pressure. So it's the ultimate test to your nerves, when you "hulk out" and all that. (Laughter) So that's all new.

SCHWARTZ: You seem to have done this in the past, though. I mean, you jumped into *Sense and Sensibility*, which was a big period film, and people said, "How can Ang Lee, who's made these smaller films, do a Jane Austen adaptation?" But you seem to enjoy taking on these challenges.

LEE: I like them. I'm forever a film student. I like to see my career as an endless learning how each genre or mixed genre was made. That gives me a thrill. And James has always worked with me. He's a professor, a film professor. So we like to explore and see what kind of... It's not really stories or character that interests us—at least not me. It's always what kind of ingredients of cinema that we try to get.

And personally, coming from Taiwan, I hate to be categorized. For *The Wedding Banquet*, all the ethnic... They all expect you to do one thing or another, and I'm desperately trying to jump out of it. And each time I make that leap, I'm stretching myself. So I still want to be who I am, but not who I am at the same time. Yeah, James can give you a better rundown on that.

SCHWARTZ: [To Schamus] Well, what was your idea about why *The Hulk* would be a good Ang Lee project? And what was your approach, then, to writing the screenplay?

SCHAMUS: Well, one of the things that—you know, pitching Ang on *The Hulk*—that I was most excited about was precisely that part of the film that I could have very little to do with. That was the creation of what you got a tiny taste of in these clips—but not a lot; but the movie, it's huge—is this new cinematic language, where you're taking

your inspiration from the comic-book panel: the page that's so broken up and splashed, and these forced perspectives, and this incredible energy around the frame, and this ability to tell stories in huge bits and chunks and pieces and fragments that collide with each other.

You guys are literally the first human beings to actually see even frames from this movie. We did screen the film last week for the first time for the studio and initial press. And, you know, there's 125 transitions in this film that are all done like turning the page of a comic book or going from panel to panel. And people didn't even notice that it was so rich in that; I mean, it's so seamless.

So part of writing the script on this film—but for all of Ang's movies that I've worked on the screenplays [for], it's the same thing... If I do other studio writing jobs, I try to write the best possible screenplay I possibly can, so that no director could screw it up. I mean, that's the goal. And for Ang, I try to write... Basically, I try to put him in as much peril as possible. You know, I just basically close the gates, shut the iron doors, turn on the tap, get the gas going, and then see if he can get out, you know? (Laughter) Get him to the ledge, kick him over, and then see if he flies or drops or whatever. So it's really creating these problems that I can't solve, but I know that he can; and if he doesn't, then they won't hire us again, but you know... It's very funny for me to hear, you know, stepping up to big movies like *Sense and Sensibility*. After two years of *The Hulk*, it's like, *Sense and Sensibility* looks like a walk in the park these days.

SCHWARTZ: With *Crouching Tiger*, you just wrote in the script, "They have the most incredible fight scene you've ever seen"?

SCHAMUS: Yeah, typical James Schamus genius screenwriting on *Crouching Tiger*. (Laughter) The first paragraph was, "This film will have the greatest martial arts action sequences in cinema history." And then when you get to the first one, I used two words that I used for every fight scene in the script, which is, "They fight!" (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: So this tells us a little bit about the director's job and the process.

LEE: I like that kind of writing. I never treat him like a writer, as he deserves. To me, he's the creative partner.

SCHWARTZ: Your original background was in theater. And the idea of the theater director, almost, is more that you're going to take a text that's already written—you know, a great play—and have fun interpreting it. You've said that you're not so interested yourself in doing the initial writing as [in] the interpreting.

LEE: Well, I think cinema—I think it's proper to say that here, in the museum of cinema—cinema is a looker. I think sight and sound, fundamentally, is different from theater. And coming from that theatrical background, it's my strength. So I'm not as scared as the actors, or worried as much as some of the directors, even [though] it's sometimes my foreign language. So that was my strength, and how I staged them, and decided how to photograph them. But a movie is sight and sound.

There are many ways and means of visualizing and going about it. I've been doing that, experimenting, to the extent to which I had to pick up comic books to break away from that theatrical [mold]—not quite successfully. Because, after all, the most identifying image we have is our own faces. That speaks to you. If you have to watch for two hours, that's what should keep you going after ten minutes. And no matter how slick you can get, it's the human relationship, human emotion, and progression, the suspense, that keeps you going for that long, and feeling satisfied at the end. So I guess I can never get rid of that theatrical part. I've been trying, from the first movie to this, [to depart from it] as far as I can. Each time, I can only go this far, then I have to fall back to human feeling, which, theatrically—especially in Western theater, the dramatic content and conflict is still strongest. I've still been using high drama. But each time, I try to get away to this. And I almost shoot the film. I force myself to turn into a visualized director.

Like *The Hulk*. The movie was already cut, but the Hulk was not there. It ends up I have to do the Hulk, because nobody knows the continuity. A humanized creature was never done before by

CGI. I do whatever it takes, but still, at the end of the day, I think I'm still a theatrical person.

SCHWARTZ: I just have to flash back to the beginning of your working together, which really started, in a way, with a student film that you did. I mean, with you [Schamus] seeing your [Lee's] student film. So if you'd pardon the flashback—but to go back to the NYU days, you were, I believe, in the same class or there at the same time as Spike Lee?

LEE: No, he was a year ahead of me. I worked on his film; he never worked on mine.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, so he owes you one. But you worked on *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop*.

LEE: He doesn't owe me, because I got to see how he makes movies and all that. That's how the school works out: we help each other. If they're ahead of you in years, then you just be their slave. (Laughter) And the next year, you get to enslave somebody else. So that's how it works. My student film was probably the hottest of that year.

SCHWARTZ: Your film was called *Fine Line*. Now, Spike made his film, then immediately made *She's Gotta Have It*, and was off and running. But there was a period of about six years before you were able to make your first feature. And if you could maybe...

LEE: Yeah, I look up to him as a good writer. Because I worked on his film. He shot very quickly. And then pretty quickly got to make movies. And he was then ahead of everybody, because he kept making movies. So something inspired me. A shy person like myself? There's no way anybody will give me material or I can get hired as a director, unless I have my own material. You have to sit at home writing. It just doesn't click. My English, my knowledge of local culture, what to write about, and just simply the skill as a writer is not enough.

And I always write somebody, the leading man, like myself—a man who cannot make [a] decision; a woman does it for him. So it'll never sell anywhere. And I'm the worst pitcher in the world, in my second language. So I kept trying, kept trying. Thanks to Jane [Lee's wife]; she—not

so much believed in me, but just left me alone and went about her life. And that was the greatest support. Until I hit the right person, right writer... Yeah, it's all kind of destiny. Somebody will take a longer time than somebody else who just knows it, you know, in the early stages. The right chemistry, right help—that we can help each other.

SCHWARTZ: [To Schamus] But how did this happen? How did you come to see *Fine Line*? I think Good Machine was looking for student directors at the time?

LEE: Good Machine back then was two tables in a corner of—

SCHWARTZ: I remember James's office, which was the size of a closet with, you know—it was barely a desk and two chairs.

LEE: And I met him—well, why don't you tell him the story?

SCHAMUS: Oh yeah. Ted Hope, my partner when we founded Good Machine—he was a big fan of Ang's film, which [Lee had] made at NYU six years prior. So we called up... He showed it to me and I loved it. It was Chazz Palminteri's first movie. He was in *Fine Line*. And so we called up his [Lee's] then agents, who said, "Oh, you guys are these no-budget producers. Ang Lee has this development deal here, and he's making this movie with this movie star, and please go away." And so, "Okay, whatever." What were we going to do, stake out his house? And so two weeks later, Ang came to the office, through a mutual friend of Ted's. He had no idea that we had just tried to get in touch with him. And Ang had just won a screenplay prize in Taiwan. The Central Motion Picture Commission there had just enough money to possibly make a movie, and he was still worried, I think pretty well into production, as to whether we were actually going—this is *Pushing Hands*, his first feature—whether we were going to actually just take the money and run, or in fact make the movie. (Laughter) So...

LEE: Over the years, I'm glad that they're not crooks, but actually they taught me—both James and Ted taught me something that was very

genuine to me. I just went through six years of development hell. [My] writing [went] nowhere. **SCHWARTZ:** This period after your student film, trying to get something made...

LEE: After student films, I felt hesitant to make the first movie, because the money's so small. When I wrote for that first script competition, I didn't mean to make it; I didn't know what to do. I was desperately looking for local low-budget filmmakers to help me with that. And I was introduced; I didn't know who they were. I don't think anybody did. So they're saying that, "Your money's luxurious to us. We are the king of no-budget filmmaking here." They just said, "Pay attention. It's not low-budget, it's no-budget filmmaking. In New York, we're just the king. We want to teach filmmakers how to make the movie they can afford, instead of [staying] in development hell. It's wasting time. You're a filmmaker; you should be making films." And they said, "We're director-centered filmmaker-producers. We just want to teach them and help them..." And they still do.

Now, this is the most expensive film Universal has ever done, and they're still doing it. So, step by step, we grew together. It's a very fruitful and healthy, quite lucky relationship. I think it happens to many filmmakers. Like, Hitchcock has to have his Bernard Herrmann, and this and that. It feels to me like it was meant to happen. Like, audiences ought to see this movie, and therefore the filmmakers were brought together by fate or something. The chemistry just clicked and then it happened.

SCHWARTZ: Could you say what it was that you saw early on, James? You know, just in terms of what qualities stood out in the early films?

SCHAMUS: Well, I remember meeting Ang. In the film business, and now even in the film schools, they teach students how to pitch their projects. Which is hilarious, because, I mean... It just turns otherwise maybe sane people into complete idiots. I mean, they look like—like car salesmen on acid. "Andthenshecomesintheroom, you know, and then..." And they always... The worst moment of a pitch meeting—by the way, if you're in the business, please never do this. Never, in the middle of your pitch, stand up and act it out.

They go, “And then...” (Stands and gestures) You know, “And then they go...” (Gestures) You know. And Ang came into our office. He’s right. He’s the worst pitcher in the business. He sat down and just talked for about 45 minutes. When he left the office, I remember turning to Ted and I said, “Well, that was...long.” (Laughter)

But I said, “You know, the weird thing is that this guy—I know he’s a filmmaker because he didn’t pitch a movie, he described the movie he’d already made in his head.” It was a description of a film as a filmmaker would describe it, not as a salesman would sell it. It was a completely different experience. That, and the fact that he actually had the cash to make the movie—so what do we care?—kind of brought us into the fold. It was a really different thing. I mean, you could tell immediately.

SCHWARTZ: And at that time, I mean, you were living in Westchester, basically a househusband. You had two young children.

LEE: Yeah. Back then, just one. I didn’t know what to do with my life. You know, I didn’t have any money, so I didn’t go to the city. I was trying to think of ideas. Each time I thought of something exciting, I’d call up [my] agent. [He’d say,] “There must be, like, five such ideas being written. And two of them are in production. Everybody’s thinking of ideas.” It’s very hard.

And I go through the ordeal of pitching. If I were the money people, I would never give money to somebody like me... (Laughter) [It takes] maybe half a year to come up with the idea, then [you] write for months, then pitch; then there’d be a few people who’d be interested in it, and it wouldn’t be right. None of them are getting paid, and...it would gradually die down. And then the next one would come up. So, like, year—you know, this year just goes by, and kids grow up, regardless. But when Mason was born, I was just getting ready for, really, the bottom of my life. It seemed to be hopeless, and I had no strength, no nothing, no hope.

SCHWARTZ: Now, *Pushing Hands* wasn’t an enormous commercial success. But the next film... I mean, *Wedding Banquet* really was a very big hit for...

SCHAMUS: No, *Pushing Hands* was a big hit in Taiwan.

LEE: In Taiwan.

SCHWARTZ: In Taiwan, okay.

LEE: Nowhere else.

SCHWARTZ: Well, that counts!

LEE: Well, I was very protective of the material. James helped me on the English, and I didn’t take his advice for some other changes on the script. Then it took 24 days to shoot. Ted was the assistant director and producer. So it got made quickly. And it really hit the core of Chinese filial/parenting themes that really touched the heart. And people went crazy in Taiwan, and... Up to this day, it still remains in Asia—it’s annoying to me that they kept saying that was the best movie I made. Best movie of every director, that’s like your innocence, your virginity or something. Before you know what’s what.

SCHAMUS: It’s my mom’s favorite film of yours, by the way.

LEE: But anyway, from the second movie on, James said, “You know, you made the Chinese movie. It didn’t go anywhere. We’re going to give it one more try, if I can help you on the script.” So I got a script translated. It [*The Wedding Banquet*] was a gay comedy; it happened in the Chinese community here in America, with gay American lovers. So, a lot of my understanding about gays or the lifestyle or whatever it was, [was] fifteen years out of date. So James came in and did the rewrite. And that’s the first time I tasted a hit. Not only a hit in Taiwan, but an international hit. Things really started to take off. And I started to believe him. Yeah, so we started really scriptwriting and collaborating from that one on.

SCHWARTZ: And then *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which was very much in the feeling of some of the films that were being made in Taiwan at the time—and Taiwanese cinema was very strong at the time, movies by Ed Yang. What was your approach in terms of making that film? What were you trying to do?

LEE: I went down a very unique path. Probably nobody else [was] like me. I meant to make Taiwanese mainstream movies for the studio there. By virtue of the success of foreign-language films elsewhere in the West, they're arthouse. Inevitably, *Eat Drink Man Woman* was under that pressure. We worked together in this kind of a new mainstream movie for Taiwan, and somehow it worked probably even better outside of Taiwan. Again, James worked on the screenplay, but it's a Taiwanese story, unlike the Chinese who live with Americans in New York [in *The Wedding Banquet*]. So it's a different adventure. He read as much Chinese philosophy, novels, what have you, as possible to try to be Chinese. Like when I try to be American. And it just didn't click for me. Then he got so frustrated...

SCHAMUS: I did. I changed all the names in the script of *Eat Drink Man Woman* to... Because I was really trying to learn about Chinese culture and food, and I was doing the research. And it was always, you know, "The Chinese person would never say this." This kind of thing. And so I changed—in the computer—all the names, globally, to Jewish names. You know: Sarah. So Jia-Chien was Sarah, Jia-Ning was someone else. And then I changed them all back. I wrote it just totally Jewish. I said, "Forget it, I'm just writing a Jewish thing." And changed them all back. And it was true, I swear to God—this is actually not a made up story. He came over, he read the script, and it was like watching somebody tasting the food on the stove. He goes, "Oh, this is pretty Chinese." And it was the weirdest thing. And if you see the movie...

SCHWARTZ: Of course, you could keep the Chinese food that way, still.

SCHAMUS: Yeah. If you see the movie, you'll notice that—I think it's Jia-Ning's best friend at the fast-food joint: she turns to her and... Of course to me, speaking Mandarin, it is—I know how to order a beer; that's about it. But then in the middle of the Mandarin sentence, she goes, "Rachel, da-da-da-da." I was like, Oh, I forgot to change that name. (Laughter, applause) It was still Rachel, you know. And then I realized somebody had used that name in the original draft. So I thought I had come up with Rachel, but

somebody else had come up with it. It was one of the other writers. So it was a crazy, mixed-up kind of thing.

LEE: As the movie got noticed—as so often [happens], people come up they say, "Oh, it's just like an Irish family," "It's just like Italian families." And I figure maybe what the Jew is fighting about verbally, we're thinking in our heart. We don't verbalize it, the Chinese. But there is something unique and universal about the process that we're going through. And I think when you try to understand another culture, or you try to have the other culture understand you, you have to go through the excitement of exoticism. Like, something different. That's why they [audiences] don't want to see it instead of watching a Hollywood movie, which is universal all the way. And then you need something not only special but universal, and that you can only understand through logic, not living through that culture. So by making him understand—other people understand—or try[ing] to make our chemistry work, I actually have to think about where I come from, why this and that.

SCHWARTZ: You've said that in making *Sense and Sensibility*, you found connections between Jane Austen's world and Taiwanese society that you experienced growing up.

LEE: Well, life in general, I think. I was making a family drama about personal free will and the conflict between personal free will and social obligations. Jane Austen; nobody put it better. (Laughter) It's all about sense and sensibility, the subcurrent of life itself. I felt I knew her right away—except I have to make it in English and work in an English texture. That's the scary part. But at heart, I really felt I knew the movie to begin with.

SCHWARTZ: And *The Ice Storm*, what amazed me—because I grew up in the suburbs at that time, and I think James grew up at a similar time... But you captured it so perfectly. You captured the feeling of American suburbia in the seventies. Could you talk a bit about how you achieved that? I mean, I've read that you actually read some of these self-help books from the seventies, and were watching sitcoms. But how—

LEE: I worked with people like James. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

LEE: There's a whole group of them. In a funny way, they were the children's age in 1973, like in the film. So a lot of the things they did, I didn't do it. Like the whip and a lot of the things, like blow-up toys—James did it; I never did anything like that. (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: My kids are here, Ang; thanks. (Laughter)

LEE: And everybody pours in, and then they are at the parents' age, and living through the mid-life crisis in America in a very different atmosphere. So that's what makes it genuine.

I just pay a lot of attention. If something clicks, I want to make a movie with them, because they all talk to me. The material all varies. I have to pick and choose. I think doing a foreign culture—to me, New England, Connecticut, is exotic to me. But that's from my perspective. I was a lot sharper than they were to see what's behind it, because I was not attached to the living experiences. On the reverse, James is a lot sharper at seeing what I had [written] in Chinese. It's, "Oh, it's about this and that." And after, like, seven months, I realized, Yeah, he's right. I think you can be more accurate—but that could be cold, too. Or it's just pure fantasy about another culture. But in terms of texture, I have to learn from those guys, and I have to go through diligent studies and take it in. But I think, after all, I'm a professional filmmaker. I can take something and make it work. That's what I'm good for. But I didn't make those movies by myself, or overnight.

SCHWARTZ: You brought the Rick Moody novel—I believe it was your idea, James, to...

SCHAMUS: Well, my wife had suggested I read it. And I read it, and I gave it to Ang and I said, "This is just a great book by a colleague and friend of Nancy's. Just read it. There's no way you're going to want to make a movie out of this, but you got some free time." And he came back a few days later, said, "I read it. Let's make a movie out of it." (Laughter) [I said,] "You can't make a movie out of that book."

LEE: The benefit is that we got it really cheap, right?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, got the rights to the book?

LEE: Yeah, nobody wants to make...

SCHAMUS: Nobody wanted those rights, but that—because you had the freedom then. At least the option was cheap, and then I think it was...

LEE: And then we met Rick Moody, the writer. I told him, "It's not your book anymore, it's my movie." (Laughter) So that was the end of it.

SCHAMUS: Well, he had a friend who was a mutual friend of yours, who had given him the story and said, "Once they option the book, you just—you stand on one side of the brick wall, and what happens is, you throw your book over the wall, and a year later they throw the movie back over the wall." So they said, "Don't get involved." But, you know, I was so wracked, because the book has almost no dialogue, no recorded dialogue, and takes place just in 24 hours. It really, you know, sticks to the unities—you know, the kind of Aristotelian unities. And so I had to kind of create this whole world off of this seed that was the book. And I got very nervous right before the movie, and I did give the script to Rick, who, it turns out, was very nervous, too. And luckily, he was...

LEE: He was very positive.

SCHAMUS: Oh, it was such a relief, because I think we would've felt really bad karma.

LEE: We're all fans of his books.

SCHAMUS: Yeah.

LEE: But making a movie is something else.

SCHAMUS: So he came on the first day of shooting, and he had an almost kind of out-of-body experience, seeing all these people in the period costume, the details. And we shot right in New Canaan, where the book takes place, and where part of his childhood had been. And Ang had insisted—I mean, we'd done a lot of location scouting in the Northeast corridor, and at the end

of the day, he really wanted to be where the book took place.

Of course, the locals of New Canaan were not particularly pleased at the depiction of the local customs and mores. And they were also just kind of, I mean... Just a lot of lovely people, by the way, everybody in New Canaan—we love the people there. (Laughter)

I mean, people were so outraged. I mean, the behavior... By the time we left, everybody was—it was kind of a lovefest, but the first couple months there, the behavior was so insane. I mean, I cannot tell you how bad. And we had just come from this lovely experience in England, making *Sense and Sensibility*, where people were just so nice. And one day Ang turned to me and said, “James, why are these people acting so terribly?” I mean, really, the lowest of human behavior.

LEE: “They hate me. Why do they hate me?” (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: Well, and I said, “Ang, the reason they live here is because they hate people like you.” (Laughter) Oops.

LEE: Yeah, there were days that James came, days that I was on the set. Ten o’clock, we’re all eating breakfast, we’re sitting there, and he has to talk to the town people and try to get us to start shooting.

SCHAMUS: Literally, I mean, we were—I mean, held up. I mean, the most illegal, just venal money-grubbing... Literally, I’d pull up on set at 7:30 in the morning, and I look at all the guys on the crew sitting around eating doughnuts, and I’m like, “Whoa.” You know, “Did everybody become a Teamster for a day? What’s going on here?” (Laughter) They’re like, “Talk to that guy.” You know, and the location manager was like, “Well, the city pulled the permit.” And I had to go in there, and it was, you know... It was a good time. It was happy—happy, fond memories.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Wow, you have these pent-up feelings about *The Ice Storm* production. (Laughter) I’m glad we got a chance to...

SCHAMUS: They’re not pent-up.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, okay. (Laughter) I think you’ve said that one of your scripts for it was more sort of an outright comedy. I mean, it’s a very deeply felt, dark film.

LEE: And I made a tragedy out of a comedy script. Social satiric comedy, you know. But after all... The scene when the kid gets electrocuted—that I remember very clearly is on page 200. It just clicked: I must make a movie out of it, because I could see it. So that’s how it happened. I had to deal with the death of the kid. And I remember when the studio finally greenlit it, or was thinking about the movie—that was after *Sense and Sensibility*; we’re in a good place. And they would say, “Oh, the idea is great, but do we have to fry the kid?” (Laughter)

But that’s why, you know... Anyway, we were lucky we got to make the movie. But still, I have a problem... I think I shot it very funny, a lot funnier than what it can take. But then the ending was preposterous for the moviegoers. So, gradually, we had to tone it down, and... Yeah, quite an alteration from what we thought we were doing. And also, I just got excited about the project. I didn’t know what I was getting in on until we got the money to do it; then I did research about 1973. It’s like a walk in a minefield. So it was quite a nerve-wracking experience for me.

SCHWARTZ: But there is a long tradition of directors from other countries coming and making great films about America, and I think this is in that tradition. Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, many, many.

LEE: Well, nobody makes movies like Americans do. That’s just like, you know, like launching the space shuttle. If you’re good at it, you have to come to America. Certain materials. Well, I can make similar movie [elsewhere] like *The Ice Storm*, but how to make ice?

SCHWARTZ: So you’re saying that you have available the technical talent here. But you bring the vision.

LEE: It is a big film industry. It’s healthy: it has so much talent—the support, the resources, incredible! And the distribution. It’s just a bigger, more healthy entity for filmmakers, for a certain type of filmmaking. So for me, if I can get the right

help, right material, and make it my way... Some movies have to be made here.

And not necessarily all great filmmakers or good filmmakers were born and raised here. People come here. It's like the NBA, so to speak. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Right, yeah.

LEE: And this is where you exercise that...

SCHWARTZ: Well, Roman Polanski is another example.

LEE: Yeah. Some don't make the adjustment. There are personal things too strong, or they don't want to give up, or they don't want to make adjustments. Some just tune in right away, like myself, yeah.

SCHWARTZ: *Ride with the Devil* is an underrated film, or a film that should've been in the theaters longer than it was. We're showing it tomorrow. Could you talk about that? Because I think that, again, was a novel that you found and adapted.

LEE: Yeah. Actually, Nancy [Schamus's wife] found it. Another book Nancy—or Nancy's friend...

We wanted to make a war movie. I wanted to make a war movie after *Sense and Sensibility*.

SCHWARTZ: Like, make a guy film, or something?

LEE: Yeah, a guy film—no women!

SCHAMUS: You described it as a dirty-fingernail movie. (Laughter)

LEE: Dirty fingernails. And we tried to find something that could be shot in America, not England or somewhere else. And that book came along. I'm still confused about why the film wasn't...

SCHWARTZ: But confused about why it didn't do better, or...?

LEE: Yeah, or maybe the subject matter was hard to get people's attention [with] or something.

SCHAMUS: Well, it was a very particular time. And you know, it's funny, because people always said, "After that experience, why would you go back to the same studio to make *The Hulk*?" And of course, the people at the studio at the time were so supportive of *Ride with the Devil*. But from the moment we started making the movie to the time we delivered the film, we were on our fourth president of production at the studio. I mean, we didn't have anybody's phone number there. The studio had lost, like, a half-billion dollars under old management, and was in the process of being sold and resold, so that literally the only people who actually survived the experience with us were the people who actually then became the current troops there, who are fantastic. And they loved the movie.

There was a day, I remember—it had nothing to do with *Ride with the Devil*—where I looked at the list, the EDI list of coming releases, and I noticed that the studio had literally pulled out every movie for the first half of the year. Like, they just said, "We're not releasing movies for a while, till we get some cash in." And I thought, Oops, I think we're in some trouble here. So they pulled it back together again. I mean, it's one of the great Hollywood stories. Of course, we're some of the little victims of it, of seeing that studio go from being this incredible pit to becoming the number-one studio two years later. In the meantime, *Ride with the Devil* just got tossed aside.

LEE: I was making—when it was released, I was making *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in China, when I knew what happened with the film. It was just one of the awful feelings. Even with *The Ice Storm*, it was unusual, like a commercial hit. Eventually people saw it. But this didn't even get any response; I don't know what happened. So when I came back, James wrote me a twelve-page letter explaining the ordeal he went through, that he didn't want to trouble me while I was making another movie in China. And I went to a bar with James and, you know, we had some whiskey. (Laughter) Well, I felt I wanted to, like, get drunk and try to learn from the experience. And James said, "Look, you..." I can't phrase it the way he phrased it, but basically he said, "Look, *The Wedding Banquet* was the most profitable film in 1993. This one, I don't—I dare not say in film history, but in 1999, lost the most

money. So you don't want to learn anything from the experience." (Laughter) I just stopped cold there. I don't know why he said that, but we kind of stopped there and then we started to moan about this and the other stuff. So that movie remained a mystery to me. I love the movie. I had some of [my] greatest times making the movie.

SCHWARTZ: One of the great things about it is all the authenticity. I mean, clearly, you did a lot of research. It has a great feeling for what the period might have really been like.

LEE: In making a movie on both sides, Chinese and American, I found... We're professional filmmakers. If you mean business, if you're serious enough, I think you can get the details right. And then the atmosphere of the particular society or time is much harder. And then, to me, the hardest thing is when you're facing theatrical conventions, rather than historical [ones]. I got it from the books. I got very excited. But it's very different from the theatrical convention—how you see civil wars or westerns or American history, and what's been taught, and what's been put on image.

SCHWARTZ: Well, I mean, just starting with the fact that...

LEE: When you give them the real thing, they say you're a foreigner. And I am a foreigner. (Laughter) That's why I care for the real things instead of the self-image, the reflection of self. And when I go back to China, it's the same—we have the same ordeal. And I've found something interesting about history and the images we create that tell us it's part of the culture. And that's very, very powerful—more powerful than reality; it becomes the truth. So that's the biggest enemy, or friend, in the world of cinema that a filmmaker can have. You don't know what's real, but you're dealing with people, after all.

SCHWARTZ: I think the idea of guerilla warfare and disorganized warfare that's not between these, like, great armies that come together for... I mean, you were clearly trying to do something different with this film than...

SCHAMUS: Well, we were doing a lot of different things with it. We were kind of analyzing and

bringing to the screen a side of the ideology that we've been kind of shoveled, especially here in the North, you know, which was like: Everybody in the North was really good, and they all wanted to free the slaves; and everybody in the South was really bad, and they... And when you get to Missouri, which was a slave state, but it was a Union state, and you start looking at the way in which the politics worked out—like, why was the Emancipation Proclamation actually three [two] years after the war started? What was Lincoln really thinking? And you start seeing kind of the shades of difference in meaning. It's tricky stuff, you know? It really is. And it's a wonderful, fertile place. It's also the place for the western. I mean, there's a reason why Clint Eastwood's characters usually come from Missouri.

All these Southern heroes—or *The Virginian*, which was the first major western, you know, with Gary Cooper; but all by way—they're all Southerners who finally then become Westerners somehow. But weren't they Southerners? Or I guess they were... How does that work? So we kind of went into all this stuff. But it's a great film, and there's a reason why Bruce Springsteen just said it was [his] favorite film he saw last year. And it certainly—I think it's now in its own afterlife picking up.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) If you could talk about working with actors, American actors. And you've worked with actors from so many different countries.

LEE: First of all, when I was a student like yourself, [I wondered] what is the best method of acting? Or can one acting method apply everywhere? No. I think it's very important for you or anybody to know that there is no such thing. It depends. There's no set rules or method. As a director, it's like tai chi, pushing hands. Whatever comes along, you have to take that and reverse it and make use of it. That's the director's job. And I've found actors are doing the same thing. They're not just bringing me the English acting, American acting when I work with them. They are bringing in something I need to make a Chinese vision—or, whatever, Ang Lee vision—of the movie. They work for me, too. Then I have to tailor the movie for them. It's a relationship. Eventually, it has to find an audience. [Audiences] have certain

viewing habits, or they pick and choose. Sometimes they want something genuine, sometimes they want to be nostalgic and be drawn into something more exaggerated. It all depends. Depends [on] the genre, the vibe.

There's no such thing as American acting, English acting, Chinese acting. Generally speaking, the Chinese are more obedient. And they come in and say, "What do you want? What do you want us to do?" I say, "I want you to do this and that." So, facing most of them, I have to come up with ideas and show it to them, and they will try to mimic and try to make it work for me. And they're very obedient to the lenses; they'll totally give the image to the filmmakers.

The English actor—by that time, when I did *Sense and Sensibility*—they like to tell you... They're mostly theatrically trained. Very proud of it. Back then, there were not a lot of big productions there. So most of them do television, so they're used to this kind of size, and they tell you; they carry the scenes like this. If I put a camera there [close-up], they get very nervous, like, "What...?" Or way back. They're... Like the Chinese, they know you're putting them in something to reflect their—whatever you want to make. But the English were like—they get that. But people like Emma Thompson or Kate Winslet, they don't do that. So there's always an exception, but as a group... And for Americans, I worked with, you know, Kevin Kline and Joan Allen, which is like a dream to somebody else that has a movie-star or general American way of, like, you know, whatever. So all I have to use is their strength and make it happen. As a Chinese actor, it's a great disadvantage. I think acting here is harder than directing, because we're behind cameras. You have ideas; you can make things work. After all, it's about sight and sound. I could hardly speak English in full sentences when I directed *Sense and Sensibility*; yet I directed Jane Austen.

SCHAMUS: Ang's English got a lot worse whenever he didn't want to understand what people were saying. (Laughter) I remember with the English actors, everybody just wanted to discuss, "What's my motivation?" And he'd just come off of *Eat Drink Man Woman*. The first days of shooting, he came to me and said, "You know,

James, I used to be the emperor, and now I'm just the president." (Laughter)

LEE: Well, I can go on. I think actors—indeed Chinese acting here is harder, because your image and your performance has to be put up front, be identified with the mass audience. It's just harder. But if you want to do it, there's a way to do it, and you have to struggle with it. And I hope there are more Chinese writers here. Because Chinese here, or Asian here—there is not really a market yet. It's not like the African Americans or Latin Americans; there's a definite market for them. We're a minority of a minority still. So it's hard, unless you create your own.

So maybe you want to do what I did. I wasn't an actor, but I started acting to earn the right to direct from [the] Chinese; [and] working with people like James, who has a more open heart, in New York, with a lot of energy—his creative energy—and gradually you work your way up. And back in English-language performances and productions, it's just harder. And you have to always expect to do twice as much and get half as much.

I've always been lucky, so I got sponsorship from the Taiwanese government and worked with James. And my American peers from school, they didn't get any help. And I got more chances than American kids. So it's very hard to say. Don't get frustrated, and just keep trying. It is hard. You have my sympathy, but... Just keep trying. There's no method. You just have to survive and make it work, and try to impress.

SCHWARTZ: Did you think you sort of take an outsider perspective on *The Hulk*, because you didn't grow up with American comic books?

LEE: To be honest with you—I don't want to sound pompous, but my take on *The Hulk* has nothing to do with Chinese or non-Chinese. It's because I'm a better filmmaker than some of the others. And the way I proved that I can pull this off was actually by [directing] a Chinese film, in which I mixed a pop genre in a Chinese way with Western psychology and drama, and it seems to work. And that got people excited, and I earned the right to make this one on my own terms. I think the way people see the world—their vision is

established where they grow up. And I grew up in Taiwan. I didn't come here until I was 23. So my way of looking at things is pretty fixed. But then in adapting that, making [it] into a movie, I try to be as American as possible, and as Ang Lee as possible, of course. Just give it my best shot.

And then neither me nor my crew were thinking about... In the past, they gave me excuses in language. Like, I'd give very brutal directions. Well, James can tell a lot of brutal stories.

SCHAMUS: "Try not to look so old." (Laughter)

LEE: Well, things like that.

SCHAMUS: They love him, you know? I say [the same thing], I would be dead. He says it, they're like... (Laughter)

LEE: I could get away with that, that's the... But after all, I think right now people don't even give me the leeway... I say something, but it means something else in my language. If they're not happy with the words they're saying, they come right back to me, as if they don't have to care [about] my feeling as a Chinese, because I passed through that stage. They treat me equally. So it's really about making the scene work.

I have some ideas, I get excited, I try to make myself clear. And I get people excited, and we try to make the scene work. So in terms of takes on *The Hulk*: because I did a Chinese martial-arts film, I got to be an expert on mixing these two elements together. And it just happens that the hippest thing right now is the Chinese action camerawork. So I kind of became an expert [in that], too. That's an advantage. So you never know what's, you know... One day it's an advantage, one day it's a disadvantage.

But I found doing foreign—America's foreign to me—I'm sharper, definitely, and pick on certain things that people usually leap through; they don't think about it. And vice versa. People are sharper than I am when I'm doing Chinese. That's an interesting place, when you have the outsider/insider look. I think bilingual and mixed culture is a big advantage to me. I don't think it should be restricted in a territorial film style. I think

it will happen more. It's already happening. It's only going to go more and more in that direction.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I thought that *The Ice Storm* was the best movie of 1997. And I remember thinking at this time that the studio didn't really seem to promote it the way that they promoted films like *Titanic* or *L.A. Confidential*. Do you think that if they had promoted *The Ice Storm* more, it might have been remembered at Oscar time?

SCHAMUS: Well, I won't go into details. You know, filmmakers love to blame the distributor. And now that I'm a distributor, I love to blame the film—no, I don't really. But it's hard. They had a very specific release strategy—which I won't get into the specifics of—which definitely didn't work for the campaign, the "kudos campaign," as *Variety* calls it. But it was also—you have to remember, this was a completely bizarre movie. And before the film went to Cannes, it had the smell of death written all over it. And it was only after the Cannes reception that we were able to figure out—with the critical response, which was so strong—that there was something to market. It was a very difficult film to market, actually.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about what Lee would do if he didn't make movies]

LEE: I don't know anything else except that I want to make movies. It was a hidden desire growing up in Taiwan, because it was regarded very low. It may be better now, but when I grew up, it ranked very low...you know, it's almost like a disgrace, being in entertainment. Yeah. So I never really found myself. I was very repressed. I was a very docile child. I was never rebellious. My father was the principal of my high school, so I was... (Laughter) And that was, like, one of the best high schools in Taiwan.

SCHAMUS: We've got some deep issues here. (Laughter)

LEE: And I flunked [my] college examination; that's why I got to—unfortunately, back then—fall onto the Art of—Academy of Art, in the theater department. But once I got there, I just knew that that's what I [wanted to] do. So I never really wanted to do anything else except make movies or stage, some staging. So that's my passion. My

whole being is functioned and built for that. I just don't find any meaning in anything else. I was clumsy in everything else. I don't know how life functions. (Laughter)

But I can direct a big picture or small picture, and people listen to me. And I noticed that the first year at NYU Film School. I didn't speak English. But after a while, I found people would listen to me. And sometimes we were helping each other out, and somebody else is directing, [but] it ends up people listen to me. I was, like, doing the lighting or recording sound. So there must be talent or something. It remained to be tested for a very long time. My wife used to say that if I'm not making a movie, I'm like a dead man. She said, "I don't need a dead husband," so... (Laughter) She just gave up on me for a long time.

But we're all excited; when I start making a movie, everything turns to life. There's a lot of positive reinforcement in making movies. People ask me, you know, can I encourage or give advice to young filmmakers? I always say, "They don't need it." Those who I see, my peers still making movies, are the ones who cannot be discouraged. If I want to give them advice, they're usually, like, lukewarm. You know, they try to be polite. They end up not listening to me. Those are the real filmmakers. Well, like myself; I didn't really want to listen to anyone. If anybody asks me for encouragement or advice, to me they're probably not really filmmakers in the first place, if they have any doubts. You know, when you're desperate, that's the only thing you want to do; it's not like you have a choice. Like myself. Then you keep on doing it. It hurts a lot. It takes a lot from you physically and spiritually, and everybody around you. But it's just something you love. You have to feel it. You know, there's no explanation.

SCHAMUS: Actually, I gave Ang the advice that actually made him a director, but I've told him I wouldn't tell anybody else. No. And it's the same thing: keep doing movies. The question that you asked me—Why do I continue to work with Ang and have faith in him? Together, I trust him. I

mean, it's simple: he continues to offer me jobs. (Laughter, applause)

LEE: That's not true!

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, well, the question is about *Crouching Tiger* and the way that it just blends strong ideas and strong feelings. We get a taste of that in *The Hulk*.

LEE: That's what we wanted to do, and we achieved it, to a certain extent. If that's your desire, and you get some of it—not always all of it, of course. After all, we live in the world with gravity. Somehow, you have to negotiate and come down a little bit. Idea is here, reality is here—you try to make it somewhere [in between]. But that's our intention. Sometimes people didn't have the intention. And sometimes people [who] had the intention didn't succeed as much. Sometimes they succeed more than you have. You know, it's just our dream; we don't think about it. I grew up with martial-art films. And I grew up with comics and pop culture. That's just the way I want to put my two cents into it; it's where my heart is.

SCHAMUS: Yeah, and back to your question about this combination of intelligence and action, it's a perfect segue to *The Hulk*. You know, *Variety* ran this article last week, written by people who hadn't seen the movie, which was, "Are Ang and James over-intellectualizing *The Hulk*? Is it really gonna succeed?" And they had this great cartoon of the Hulk sitting around reading Camus. (Laughter) So I thought it was pretty funny. But as I said to *Variety* and as I will say to you, there is no law that says that you have to insult people's intelligence in order to entertain them. (Applause) And you know, we hope you agree when you see *Hulk*.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, well, thank you, thank you. I think we'll end on that, and see *The Hulk* when it opens on June 20th.

LEE: It's a pleasure for me. I'm a Queens guy. I'm a Mets fan. That's my lucky hat, so I'm glad to be back here. (Applause)

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