

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ANG LEE AND JAMES SCHAMUS

Academy Award-winning director Ang Lee and his longtime collaborator James Schamus have over the course of fifteen years made films including the current *Lust, Caution* (2007); *Brokeback Mountain* (2005); *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000); *Ride with the Devil* (1999); *The Ice Storm* (1997); *Sense and Sensibility* (1995); *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994); and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993). This evening at the Times Center included clips from their movies, a conversation, and an introduction by three-time Oscar nominee Joan Allen (*The Contender* (2000), *The Crucible* (1996), *Nixon* (1995)) who appeared in Lee's *The Ice Storm*.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Ang Lee and James Schamus, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 9, 2007):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Welcome. We're here tonight, really, on the occasion of the tenth film that Ang Lee and James Schamus have worked on together. It's a remarkable body of work. I think if you see *Lust, Caution* (2007), or I'm sure many of you have seen it already, it's an amazing film. At the heart of that movie are two unbelievable performances. I think it's been said many times about Ang Lee that he's an actor's director. He actually had his training as an actor, so it's no surprise that he has sensitivity to actors.

So the way we're going to start the evening is, we have one of the best actresses working today—I was going to say best in the world. I didn't know whether to say best in the world or best in New York; I was trying to figure out which one is better. (Laughter) She was seen most recently in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007); you can applaud for that amazing performance. (Applause) You have her filmography in the program, but she had, of course, two Academy Award nominated performances, in *The Contender* (2000) and *Nixon* (1995) and in this movie, *The Ice Storm* (1997) that was made ten years ago directed by Ang Lee. There are so many great performances in that film. It's some of the best work that we've seen from Joan Allen—also from Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver, and some young actors including, of course, Tobey Maguire and a very young Katie Holmes, who's better known as a marathon runner, but she gives a great

performance in that film. But Joan Allen is here. I'm sure one day we'll be doing a tribute to her, hopefully in this venue. But tonight she's here to talk about the collaboration with Ang Lee. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Joan Allen. (Applause)

JOAN ALLEN: Hi. Thank you! It's a privilege for me to be here tonight, to have worked on this incredible film with Ang ten years ago—I can't believe it's been that long. I remember when I first saw the film, I was in Los Angeles, and I went to the 20th Century Fox screening room. I was all by myself, watching it for the first time. I remember when the film started and the sequence on the train, and the way that the opening credits happened, and the sound of the train and the sound of the music, and I knew within—I was pretty convinced that if it wasn't a perfect film—within, you know, I think I knew that within the first thirty seconds that I started watching the film.

Of all the films that I have worked on, which I am very proud of and feel that many of them are very good films in and of themselves, this is, to me, the most perfect film I've ever worked on, in terms of the entire concept, from the way it was filmed, to the set decoration, to the music, to the performances. That's a tribute to Ang, because making all those elements come together is not easy. If filmmakers could calibrate it and make a little solution that they could mix, every film would turn out like this. For the kind of story that was being told, I think it was just perfection.

We had a traditional rehearsal process, really—well, actually, often you don't get rehearsal on films, so we were lucky; we had about two weeks of rehearsal, where we all spent time together. I remember the first day of rehearsal, getting to rehearsal with a binder about this thick of research material from the 1970s, including what furniture was—you know, furniture ads, what cigarettes were being smoked, what music was being listened to. That was given to each actor, and was kind of our bible. And Ang was very encouraging that—it was based on a book, originally, which we all read, but Ang was also very encouraging that we would, each actor would think about the history, the family history of their characters, for instance what their grandparents are like, what my parents would've really been like, and really encouraged all the actors to think about their character history and where they came from and what they were like as children, before they got to this place.

Which is a specificity that many directors don't really ask of actors, and is really an incredible tool. I remember doing exercises with Kevin Kline, and Christina Ricci, and Tobey Maguire, and myself. We would walk. Ang would have us walk across the room, back and forth, so that we could walk like a family. Because if you ever notice on the street, if you're walking behind somebody sometimes, you can tell a mother and daughter, you know, or a father and son, because their gait, the way they walk is the same. Those kinds of details were very, very important to Ang. So we really benefited from the rehearsal process.

I just had the confidence, having seen Ang's earlier work, which was always so extraordinary and so truthful, that I was just sure there wouldn't be a false moment that he would allow on the screen. I think that the performances, and the performances of the young people in the movie, are just the best that they have ever, ever achieved. I think that that is Ang's eye for what's human, what's real, what's believable, and I'm just... I'm deeply grateful to have been part of *The Ice Storm*. It's still my favorite film that I've been in. I'm sure you're going to enjoy the evening, actually talking more with Ang, and he'll be able to tell you a lot more about himself than I can. (Laughs) So enjoy. Thank you. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Okay, before I bring out Ang and James, what I want to say is that what's often said about Ang Lee's films is that he keeps going from one type of film to a very different type of film. It was often remarked, you know, he would make a movie like *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), which is sort of a screwball comedy with a gay couple at the center; and this seemed to be a change of pace from his first film, *Pushing Hands* (1992), which was a very personal film, which seemed to be drawn from his own life. He made *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and people said, "That's a big shift in direction." He went from the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to the *Hulk* (2003). And his career seems to be jumping around in different directions. But there's an amazing consistency to the work, which really becomes clear when you look the films together. It's a consistency that carries through from the early films right to the current movie, *Lust, Caution*.

I think at the heart of this work is an interest in contradictions, and a contradiction between personal desire and social conventions, between modernity and tradition, between Eastern and Western traditions. And this idea of contradiction, I think, is embodied in—if you just look at the titles of his movies. *Lust, Caution* is just the latest example. *Sense and Sensibility* is another. The titles often have oppositions built into them. *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) gives you a pair of oppositions. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, I don't know if that's exactly a contradiction, but it sounds like one. (Laughter) And I think *Ice Storm* also evokes this idea of a sort of raging storm of emotion underneath a surface of ice, and Ang is always cracking through that surface. *Hulk* doesn't really work with this, so I'll just leave it at that! (Laughter)

It's a great collaboration between James Schamus and Ang Lee. And it's now my pleasure to ask them to come up and join us. So please welcome Ang Lee and James Schamus. Well, thank you for being with us. I know last time we saw you at the Museum, you had just finished *Hulk*, which was, I know, an incredibly draining experience. And I guess *Lust, Caution* was also a draining experience to make. So thanks.

ANG LEE: Yes, indeed. I just recovered, barely... last week, after the Shanghai premiere. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Which was incredible, I guess. As James was saying before, the response to the film, I don't think we quite get it here in this country, what the response has been. But it's an enormous event in Asia; almost unparalleled, I think, in the history of Chinese film.

LEE: Something like that. (Laughter) I can tell you there's a tremendous fear I had with making *Lust, Caution*. I hesitated for three years. About the same I hesitated to portray gay cowboys for Americans. (Laughter) So putting female sexuality—you say I like to weigh [two oppositions]—female sexuality and patriotism. That's very scary. You know, what would people think? You know, they think of me as a pretty decent, nice person. (Laughter) I just won the Academy, what are they going to think?

So it's very emotionally draining in the making of it. I pushed the actors to the limit. I was just telling Joan—I was so glad to see her—"Just watch this new movie, my new level of torturing actors." (Laughter) But anyway, I've been carrying that weight for over two years. It drove me insane. And the day before I showed the movie to the Taiwanese audience—that's, like, a month-and-a-half ago—it was so nerve wracking, I couldn't sleep. And in the morning, I just started to break down. I was shaking... and just witnessed what happened. Last week, I witnessed how people in Shanghai respond to the movie. And the next morning, my actors had the same feeling with, like, myself. It's like the weight in my system for over two years sort of left, just left. So I'm recovering now.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Could you talk more about what the response has been in Asia to the film?

JAMES SCHAMUS: Well, it's so funny, because Ang really was—I mean, he was absolutely convinced that the film would be completely despised over there and really written off. It's so transgressive and so radical a statement about the culture, and goes to places that literally, have never been filmed, or even discussed in polite company there, in some ways, for so long, and it was a complete write-off. So even at Venice, with the Asian press—there were hundreds of Asian reporters there—and the feedback was so strong and so positive, but you didn't really believe it.

You didn't think it would translate, even then. There was a kind of strange step back.

And it's been quite the opposite. You know, here in the States, there's been a little bit of a headwind on the rating and the length; and it's very Chinese; and there's a certain reporter for *The New York Times* who didn't like it.... Whatever. (Laughter) You know, those kinds of things happen. You know, this is culture, and so you kind of go with the flow.

After winning at Venice, it was like, "Oh, wow, we won!" Which no one thought we would ever be able to pull off. Yes, Best Picture. But it really was five weeks ago, I think, in Taiwan... but even that wasn't good enough for Ang, to open in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It opens Number One, it's doing blockbuster... I mean, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) is a footnote to the box office of this picture. (Laughter) I'm not kidding. It's just crazy!

But that wasn't good enough. Then you have these reports of literal *Lust, Caution* tours (Laughter) from the mainland to Hong Kong: They fly you; they put you in a hotel; you go see the movie... What you do after that, I don't know. (Laughter) They fly you back, you know. You have to be insured, I assume. A gigantic cultural phenomenon.

That wasn't good enough. It's Number One in the box office the first week, the second week, the third week, the fourth—I mean it's crazy! Still, he's not sleeping, he's kvetching, he's miserable. (Laughter)

Then finally last week, he went to China, the mainland, where we shot part of the film, in Shanghai, and there was a great premiere. I guess 1,200 people showed up, and it turns out the film is a gigantic—not just a blockbuster, because that's something that I think Ang could do, and then he wouldn't be having tributes, he'd just be rich. (Laughter) You know, he could just do that. But it's more than that. I think it's—what is the...

LEE: Something hits home, that's how I feel. And I couldn't name what exactly it is. I thought it was a pretty nasty movie. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Politically?

LEE: Pretty tough, politically, and on every front. And in respect of my efforts, starting from Taiwan, they didn't cut it. It was rated about the same rating here. But it showed everywhere. Everybody above eighteen would go see it. And there's the cultural phenomenon. I tried to figure out what's different from there and here, between Chinese and Americans. I kind of wound up becoming one of the experts in that, cross-culture. And I couldn't quite figure out. It was something in the social consciousness, in the collective consciousness. We call it the common aura; it's accumulation of many lives. Hundreds of years being occupied, or something in Chinese history, in the way we're growing up.

Something hits home. I don't know exactly. The same reason, I think, a fear of it, somehow, it resolved something for the audience. It's beyond—I don't care so much about [how] the box office does. They may go there because they think it's a sexy movie; I don't know. Just the way they talk about it, enthusiasm. I'm not saying everybody loved the movie, but just the way they're involved and talk about the movie. I just read a few days ago, in the most popular internet blog, there are over 1.5 million articles about the movie, and millions of people go up and talk about it; just that social phenomenon. Something I was afraid of, and that hits home, that was overwhelming.

SCHWARTZ: Wow. And similar, in a way, to what you tapped into with *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

LEE: Something hits home here.

SCHWARTZ: It did. (Laughter)

LEE: Of *course*, they're gay. (Laughter) Something needs a woman writer, like Annie Proulx, and a foreign filmmaker, like myself, just to tip over. And I think the material is so right. Again, James showed that to me; versus this time, I showed this short story to James. "What do you think I make that as my next movie? Would you invest in it? What do you say?" And the other one, James pitched it to me, "We've got something interesting you might want to take a look at." That looked scary to me. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Since there was life before James Schamus for you, I want to go back in time to your training as an actor. Could you just talk about that a little bit? Because I think you see this and feel this in your films, the sensitivity you have towards actors. So just talk about what your training was—because I think that's what brought you to this country.

LEE: Well, I grew up very artistically repressed. In my culture, doing plays and being in the entertainment business is a disgrace. So I would never get to touch art at all. So it was all academic, behave well, and I was a pretty docile child. So all that is pretty much repressed, and I became a daydreamer. I flunked the college examination, and I got to go to drama school, just as a hide-out place for next year's exam.

Then the first night I stood onstage, I pretty much shot the way how I remembered it in this new movie, *Lust, Caution*, as a stage play. I just feel that I'm out there, I'm not belonging here. So I wanted to be an actor. I want to find other characters and simulating situations. And that seems to be more truthful to me than the life I'm leading. Then after military service, I came to the States. I became a director because I couldn't speak English. I couldn't get into the actor's program. (Laughter) And after two years, I got so pissed. (Laughter) I thought best people, stage people, don't do actors. Who wants to see a stage director? (I hope there are no stage directors down there.) That's how the young minds work.

LEE: And I thought if I want to become a director, I want to direct movies. And I applied to NYU, got in. And once I got into NYU film school, I knew I had got to the right place because things are really simple; it's sight and sound. I got further proof of that when I directed *Sense and Sensibility*. I speak pigeon English. He could tell you tons of jokes (Laughter) about how I directed that movie. If that could happen, anything could happen on film for me. (Laughter) It's sight and sound, something quite universal; something that crosses language barriers.

SCHWARTZ: And you made—I guess a student film helped bring you to James. Is that true? I mean, how did you meet?

LEE: Well, that's a strange story, actually, how we met.

SCHAMUS: Well, no. I mean, I had formed a company called Good Machine, back in the day, with my partner Ted Hope at the time. And Ted had showed me Ang's NYU thesis film, which is called *Fine Line*. It was Chazz Palmenteri's first movie. I believe. Right?

LEE: Yes.

SCHAMUS: It was, yes. That film had been made six years prior to us forming Good Machine, and we kind of wondered what happened to Ang Lee for six years. It turned out he was up in White Plains in an 800-square-foot condo, in his underwear, cooking dinner for his kids. I didn't know that. We contacted his then agents, who were wonderful people, but at the time they said, "Well, you guys are these schmo independent producers," and blah-blah, "Ang has a development deal at Universal, and he's going to make a movie with Julia Roberts," or something. So they said, "No. You can't meet him."

Literally two weeks later, he came to our office. He called up Ted and said, "I hear you guys have this little company, and I just won a screenplay prize in Taiwan, and they gave me \$300,000. And somebody said you guys make movies for \$300,000... although somebody else told me you'll probably steal the money." (Laughter) He literally said this.

He came in and he pitched his first film. Pitch is really a pretty generous term. It was forty-five minutes, the most boring story meeting I'd ever heard in my life. (Laughter) I'm not kidding; I'm really not making this up. He just—it was just, "And then, in scene thirty-seven... And then he'll—" you know. And he left, and I thought, "Well, he's got the money, so why not?" (Laughter)

But we also thought—I turned to Ted, I'll never forget—I said, "Well, that was really so *boring*, but he actually, unlike most of the other *interesting* pitch meetings—" And I'm sure there are people here in the film business, or trying to get into it. There's one kind of pitch meeting which is boring, which turns out to be the interesting ones

eventually. Then there's the pitch meeting where the writer actually stands up in the middle of the pitch—have you ever been in one of those?—where he'll go, "And *then*...!" And I'm just like... I'm so scared of these people. You know, it's so horrifying. (Laughter)

He's just not a salesman. But I said to Ted, "He described—" You know, the great thing about him was, he walked in and he literally talked like a director. He described a movie that he had already made in his mind. It was already done. We just had to help him get there, and that was so compelling to us, actually. That was when we made *Pushing Hands*.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, then *Pushing Hands* was the first film, which is a sort of more straightforwardly autobiographical film, I guess.

LEE: No, it's a story about an old man. But I sort of split my personality into two. I spent six years like that Tai Chi master, meditating, doing nothing. (Laughter) Get lost in the cultural differences. Life goes nowhere. And then the American wife, who's a writer, who had no good ideas. So they get stuck together. That's where the idea came from.

I didn't write a script to make it into a movie. I just wrote it to enter a Taiwanese film script competition held by the government because it's good money to win. So when I won the first prize, I didn't know what to do with that money. Actually they gave me money to make the movie! I didn't know what to do with the money, and I didn't know if I will make that movie, because it's not artistic enough, it's not commercial enough. I don't know what to make of this script.

I took the money, and through a mutual friend of ours, he said, "His partner, Ted Hope, used to be a key P.A. in his group, when he was a P.A." He heard that he wants to produce, so he has his number. I called him up, and I walk into their office, which it two tables in the back of somebody's office... (Laughter) Now you're going to hear my side of the story. (Laughter)

Ted, like a big boy; he does look like key P.A., twenty-eight years old. And James, who's half of his size, (Laughter) he looked like a professor and a used car salesman. (Laughter) So I did my pitch

and they did their pitch. Their pitch is really great to me, unlike my pitch. They're good salesmen. They say, "We're director-focused producers. We're the king of no-budget filmmaking in New York." He said, "Listen. Not low budget, *no-budget*. (Laughter) Your money is luxurious for us. Can you make a movie in three weeks?" I said, "No, I can't." "Then four weeks. No more than four weeks." I said, "Fine." (Laughter)

They said, "We coach directors like you to make movies they can afford to make, instead of wasting time in development hell." That hit me. That hits home for me. I was in development hell for six months, so I gave them the money. I'm just glad over the years, they've kept their promises. They're gems, all the way till my tenth movie, big budget movie like *Hulk*. He still coached me how to do the movie I can afford, from the smallest to the biggest. I'm just glad he's not a crook. (Laughter) I was very afraid. That's government money. If they run or somehow messed up, what am I going to do? I really didn't know. I just prayed that they're...

SCHWARTZ: *The Wedding Banquet*, could you talk a bit about how that came about? And that was, as I said before, an incredible success as an independent film. It kind of tapped into some things that were going on at the time, including an opening up of Taiwanese cinema, the New Queer cinema, which was what it was called at the time, which you were involved with in working with Todd Haynes, and Christine Vachon, and it's a very interesting blend of different elements. Could you talk about how that came about?

LEE: Well, I wrote *Wedding Banquet*, the script, on my own, six years prior to *Pushing Hands*. It's just back then it was too Chinese to raise money here; too gay to raise money in Taiwan. So it didn't go anywhere. And I sent both of the scripts in. That won the second prize; *Pushing Hands* won the first prize. On *Pushing Hands*, James told me to touch up the script; I didn't listen to him. Other than the English he improved, I didn't really listen to him. That turns out to be a big hit in Taiwan and didn't go anywhere else in the world.

So there comes the money. This time, a little more handsome; like, three-quarters-of-a-million to

make *Wedding Banquet*. So I pitched to James. James thinks I will do a good job here. He likes the idea. But then he read the translated script, the way I wrote about gay lifestyle is about fifteen years out-of-date. He said, "We'll make one more Chinese movie. We're going to close down Good Machine if this one doesn't work." (They laugh) So from then on, he really started to work on my script, till these days. And that's proven to be pretty trustworthy, and I'm grateful for us.

SCHAMUS: It was fun with *Wedding Banquet* because the original script was actually a drama. It was kind of a tragedy. They find out their son's gay, and it's really depressing, and everybody yells at each other, then they go home. (Laughter) It was better than that.

What we did was, I pitched him, my big pitch back was, I was teaching a great book by the Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell, on screwball comedy. It's about what he calls the "comedy of remarriage." In these great screwball comedies from Hawks and they're always about couples who have divorced or split up, and then come back together. I looked at the structure of *Wedding Banquet*, and we realized that this was a comedy of remarriage. These guys, in order to stay together, they have to—one of them has to get married. That forces them to break up, and then they *should* get back together again.

So it was a classic screwball comedy; it just happened to be gay and Chinese. (Laughter) But aside from that, it was so rigorous, all the way to the end, that we re-envisioned. It took us about a month to flip what had been a wonderful drama, and just turn it into something generically that was always sitting there waiting for it to happen.

LEE: That was a good pitch to me, because I learned from the first shooting to make such rigorous shooting low, so shoestring budget, you have to shoot very efficiently. I like the way screwball comedy goes. They come into the one frame; ya-ya-ya; and they go. Next shot. So it's very efficient, and I can really control the quality of shooting. So that, they hit right away.

SCHWARTZ: The idea of the father, who is in on the secret and knows more than he lets on, is such a great twist.

LEE: That was his idea. (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: But complete fantasy. As we saw from *Ice Storm*...

LEE: We don't like resolution, the Chinese. Like something bigger than life, like *Lust, Caution*. Then he offered a solution, the twist at the end that really fits the genre and makes it function so well. Somehow, sometimes when James will write to me that a film is not quite Chinese—and then I'll do it anyway because it works so well with the movie, and it will turn out that the Chinese really like those scenes. They like the breakthroughs. (Laughs) The scene you saw between the father and the son-in-law is a typical example. So many people tell me how much they appreciate that twist.

SCHWARTZ: So after the success of *The Wedding Banquet*, the next movie you did, you go to Taiwan and make a film, *Eat Drink Man Woman*. Very much in the film is this idea of the difference between Eastern and Western cultures. There's a character in the film, a man who has a wife who's living in America, and he's kind of falling for somebody he works with. You've worked on screenplays that are both in English and Chinese. Could you talk about your work on this film and how...

LEE: It's just something painful, as a Chinese filmmaker, unless you make, like art house, strictly art house films. Our film history is a subculture to Hollywood. When you want to bring out to the world stage, to something James will be interested in, you have to upgrade it. I seldom talk about that within the Chinese community, because we want to be proud of our history. But in making a better Chinese film, even the Chinese audience who watch these days, you have to upgrade it.

The way you upgrade it, where does the source come from? It has to come from English, from classical music, good film examples from everywhere around the world, and our film language and our cultural language is not up-to-date with that. So a lot of the times when I write a script, I will work with extremely writers, such as Hui Ling-Wang, we're not good enough. Sometimes it takes a foreigner to us to write. He'll

tell you a story about... (Laughs) At first, he tried to write like Chinese. And to me, that's rubbish. They don't sound like Chinese things. Someday, one day he just gave up, and write like Jewish. And I said, "It's very Chinese." (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: That's true. It's actually not B.S. I literally did that. Change all from Ja-Chin, Ja-Ning, I changed them all to Sarah, and Rachel, and some of the minor characters--because I was doing so much research, especially for this. You know, there are books from the Yale University Press on food in Chinese culture and contemporary family life, and I was doing all...

Every time I tried to make it more Chinese, it would just be so fake and stupid, and he was really getting very nervous. And I did; I changed it globally and made everybody Jewish. (Laughter) He literally did, I kid you not. I gave him the script, and he sat there in my kitchen, and read it and he goes, "Wow, this is so Chinese!" (Laughter) I was like, "What?"

Then I went over to Taipei, because there's a little—right when you started shooting, I'll never forget—the first day of shooting, or maybe the second, was in the fast food chicken place. One of the daughters turns to her friends and speaks in Mandarin to tell her, "Can she do my shift so I can see my boyfriend, da-da?," And as she's speaking Mandarin—which I'm tone deaf, so it's all noise to me; it's very difficult for me to, you know, get. But I kept hearing this, "Da-da-da-da-da, Rachel, da-da-da-da-da." (Laughter) And I was like, "Did she just say Rachel?" And you know, "That's her name!" Because I'd forgotten to change back one of the minor character's names. Of course, at that time in Taipei, in particular, it was kind of in for the kids to take on American names, and it was just this weird artifact from kind of struggling with the script.

LEE: At that time, I thought the Jewish must be very good, verbalize what Chinese [have] in mind. So they don't say it, but they can verbalize it. (Laughter) It's still film language. You know, it's not in history, but it's...

SCHAMUS: It's because at Christmas, we go to the movies and eat Chinese food. (Laughter)

LEE: Something universal, something sounds right. Of course, what James writes, I have to turn into Chinese. This is the beginning of how I make that work. In the previous film, in our collaborations, that wasn't such a problem, because you have the central character that's American, everybody's talk—and it's in New York. It's contemporary. Everybody's trying to talk in whatever English involved. They talk like me, because they have Simon around.

I run into a bigger problem here, back in Taiwan. This film works so much better outside of Taiwan because I was still in a struggle to change that, to be authentic. When I made that movie, I was a little detached from Taiwan. It's my old memory of how I grew up there, updated with the crew, with what I see. There's attachment and detachment. I was making a craft-art piece of work. I said, "For the first time, I can work like art, a piece of artwork." The first two movies, it's about survival. Finish the day, be thankful. (Laughter) And there's no time to make craft-art out of it. I was starting to expand my filmic language in *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

So that is a little detached from the Taiwanese experience. Sometimes I feel people outside of where [a film takes place] are more eligible for [or more likely to appreciate foreign] art house films because, like, Japanese probably don't care about Kurosawa; and Taiwanese, they're really cold toward Hou Hsiao-Hsien maybe; so with the French, with Godard. I think it takes certain distance. I think that's an improvement, that movie made an improvement in me making a movie, but it was somewhat detached from the reality of Taiwan, just the words they used.

And I think I did much better with *Lust, Caution*. (Laughs) I think finally I sort of have a grasp of taking from him and making it more right. It's a learning process.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of the idea of distance, one thing I think that you've said is that you have been able to take this idea of repressive culture, very regimented, that you grew up with in Taiwan, and then apply it to other cultures. So *Sense and Sensibility* was the next film after this, and you were very at home in depicting this culture. What drew you to this material? You know, this is one of

the first times that we heard, "What is Ang Lee doing, doing this?" What is he doing adapting a comic book? Adapting Jane Austen?

LEE: That's the beginning of the adventure.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Well, and your first sort of Hollywood studio-financed film.

LEE: But by the way, ah, the young Kate Winslet. She's nineteen-years-old. Well, it was Emma Thompson, that I couldn't resist it. Actually, at that time, we were thinking about doing *The Ice Storm*. So three Chinese language films; maybe it's time I'd tried an American film. So I was thinking something in the low budget range, like \$4 million or so, if James agreed. I fell in love with a book. He recommended to me to read, just for pleasure, Rick Moody's books, and on page 200, I remember exactly, when the kid slides down the hill and being electrocuted, it becomes a movie to me. So I told James, "Let's do this movie."

So we were planning to do that, and this script came along, by Lindsay Doran, the producer. It's been her baby for a long time, for fifteen years, she's tried to raise the money. And Emma's been writing for four years already. It's a done, pretty good script. Then they sent it to me because they saw *Wedding Banquet*, thought I'm perfect for Jane Austen. (Laughter) I think it's a double-edged melodrama, whatever, and humor.

SCHWARTZ: They just saw how much money it made.

LEE: I don't know, they felt it was a sensibility.

SCHWARTZ: No, that makes sense.

LEE: Yes. And then I read the script. It was odd to me; why did they look for me? Are they crazy? For the first half, it's all bowing and shaking hands, introductions. (Laughter) And for the second half, I got it. I felt I know everything about it, except I did it in Chinese before. I just have to do it major league. I have to do it in English, which is scary. And I was very scared. As a habit, I already had the habit of if I was scared, I turned to James: "What do you think?" (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: I was scared; I just wasn't letting on. (Laughter) It was so funny, I'll never forget. Because they hadn't seen it—this is kind of Emma's and Lindsay's genius—they had seen, *Wedding Banquet*; they hadn't seen *Eat Drink Man Woman* yet.

LEE: Without *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

SCHAMUS: We had just finished *Eat Drink*, and Ang was in Europe on a publicity tour for *Eat Drink*. They had sent the script through me, and I had just gotten very excited, of course, because it was Emma Thompson! And... Here's my meal ticket; my kids can go to college now! (Laughter) So like, let's do it, you know?

LEE: The budget was too big, threatening to us. It's what, \$15, \$16 [million]?

SCHAMUS: \$15 [million].

LEE: We're thinking \$4 million, so we're kind of...

SCHAMUS: I'll never forget, he was on the publicity tour, and he would read a few pages, and then I would call, maybe in Paris. And I'd say, "No, keep reading." Then he'd read some more. Finally—I'll never forget—you were in Hamburg, and I said, "You've got to get to page eighty-four of the script," because on page eighty-four, there's a scene between what became Emma and Kate, where one sister turns to the other and says, "What do you know of my heart?" And that was a line that I had written for *Eat Drink Man Woman*, between two sisters.

I said, "It's very similar, but it's not a remake; it's very different." But I said, "When you get to that scene, you will understand why they thought of you," even though they had never seen *Eat Drink Man Woman* yet. It was so uncanny. And I remember you got to that page in Hamburg, you said, "Oh, I get it. Okay. I'll take that."

LEE: Well, it just looked familiar to me. The vibe, the sensibility, the feeling, the emotion, the way the social satire, the double-edged sword of the humor, the cut and dried sense of humor. I think, "I'm the man, they think." (Laughter) Then when I met Lindsay, I guess I talked about the writing, I talked about the humor. She said she met a

German woman director, talked about humor, and she said, "What humor in Jane Austen?" (Laughter) So she really liked my pitch.

To this day, I think they had a problem finding an English director for that movie. They're so jaded about Jane Austen, the BBC type of things. So they had to look for a foreign director. That's my suspicion. (Laughter)

But anyway, I met Emma. It went well, with my broken English. Somehow, I have to give them credit, to invest in me. I think they were very scared to. (Laughter) Then I found out other than Lindsay, there's no American around me. All top of the line English cast and crew. It was very, very frightening to me. So I brought James as my entourage. (Laughter) I couldn't socialize with them; I couldn't talk with them; I was so shy. And James would go around, tell them, "Ang's like a Zen master. (Laughter) He doesn't say a word, but he's everywhere. He's omnipresent." (Laughter)

He's the only person I know who can talk down Emma Thompson. He can really talk. He's just a man [who has] what I'm short of; I think that makes up for a good match.

Anyway, I slogged through the—once the dailies turned out and the studio loved it, and gradually I earned my right to direct an English piece. Gradually sort of, it gets on the track. Somehow, nobody was terribly experienced in producing that movie. So James coming as the big American producer, he bluffs his way into producing the movie, I think. And at the end, I think he really becomes a pretty good, he trained to be a good producer.

SCHAMUS: We delivered it under-budget. Columbia Pictures, I think that was the first one in about... ever, I think! (Laughter) It was amazing; bracketing that show were just some amazing moments. I mean, we'd come off *Eat Drink Man Woman*. In Taiwan, the director is addressed as "Mr. Director". That's how you talk to Ang. You don't say, "Hey, Ang..." you say, "Mr. Director, may I...?"

I'll never forget, the first day visiting Ang—I'm sorry, "Mr. Director"—on set there. I'll never

forget, we were eating lunch, and it was at this long picnic table out in front of one of the sets. Everyone else was sitting around on the ground. We're chatting away, blah-blah-blah-blah. I looked up, I said, "Ang, what's the problem? Does everybody hate your guts? What's going on? Nobody's, like, here." I'll never forget it, because you hadn't been in Taiwan for a while; you'd been living in New York and you'd been making movies here. And he literally went, "Ah. I forgot to invite people up to eat at the table." (Laughter) It was that kind of scene. It was just hard for you to, you know, get integrated into that.

And then of course, the first day of shooting on *Sense and Sensibility*, and you know, there's a lot of that... you're working with some of the greatest actors out of the British tradition, so there's a lot of this, you know, "Are you sure, Ang, you don't prefer my left profile? (Hint, hint. I'm getting a million dollars. Please, left!)" Or, you know, "What's my motivation for, you know, picking the cherry off the mantle?" Whatever it is, it's a lot of discussion. And it got a little, mm, tense. Ang turned to me and he said, "James, I used to be the emperor, now I'm just the president." (Laughter)

LEE: Well, this movie is a great training for me. To me, it's the best film school. To slog through the actors. They bounce around. You know, they all talk at the same time. I can not win an argument... Because the way I was brought up is we take orders, until one day you're old enough to give orders. Everything is implicit, and it's standing in the back... We never trained to verbalize, let alone to win a debate. Or communication. So you find a lot of aspects in my movies about repression, let alone not communicating. That's the way I'm brought up. So that reinforced me to explain. First to Lindsay, my first producer. Thank God James is not like that. "Why are you doing...?" I have to explain to her. I have to explain to the actor why I'm doing certain things, which I'm totally not used to. I think most of the Chinese directors are not used to that. You know, you bring your head; people have to guess. You're so authoritative, and you just look thinking; everything will be fine. (Laughter) I remember when I was doing P.A., the first lesson, little tip people gave me: "Just look busy." (Laughter) I'm sure some of you might know that. And when I do directing, I also took the

hint. I just look thinking. When you look thinking, things are... (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: It was also true that Ang was able to use this...

LEE: But I wasn't really able to do that there. I had to really slog my way through in making that movie.

SCHAMUS: Yes, but you were... I mean, the "Ang speak no English," kind "Ang so horny" kind of—does not—I mean, you got away with it on this one, and a little bit on *Ice Storm*...

LEE: *The Ice Storm*, right.

SCHAMUS: Were the last two. I mean, come on. Emma is... you know, there's some discussion on. Ang will literally go, "Okay, could you do the next one, just don't look so old." (Laughter) Well, if I said that, Emma Thompson would literally pick that thing up and just, like, it'd be four blows to the head, I'd be dead. She's like, "Oh, Ang. Wow." (Laughter) "What does it mean?" I'm like, "Yeah, okay..." (Laughter) Or Hugh Grant, my other one. My favorite Hugh Grant direction was, "Could you do it this time like a bad actor?" (Laughter) He was like, "Okay, I guess. Yeah, I can get into that."

LEE: I used to be able to get away with that.

SCHAMUS: You can't do it anymore, I can tell you that.

LEE: In *The Ice Storm*, I still can pull that off, yeah.

SCHAMUS: Oh, yes.

SCHWARTZ: But *Sense and Sensibility* must've given you confidence in looking at these worlds that were different; 1970s suburbia...

LEE: I'm so proud of this scene. Yeah, I'm so proud of this...

SCHWARTZ: Of that scene?

LEE: Of that scene. You know, 1,800—no, 200 people, two cameras, the ballroom dancing scene. I think that's pretty good. Choreographed

and shot. (Laughter) And in four days, to actually make that work? I was very proud of it. I was teaching the ladies how to hold themselves, and I was from Taiwan. We shot that—that place was where *Barry Lyndon* (1975) was shot. At night, I was just by the bridge, by the Grecian temples. I said, “What am I doing? It’s like a dream.” I was there directing English drama, telling those society ladies how to hold themselves, how to dance. (Laughter) It’s incredible. It’s like a childhood dream come true.

SCHWARTZ: And then after that, you do...

LEE: It could happen. I don’t know. That’s the movie magic. If you believe in it, you just, you know... Looking back, Hey, I’ve done that. But before I’d done it, it seems to be impossible. It’s very encouraging. In making a movie, you can make anything happen.

SCHWARTZ: Well, you go then to 1970s suburban America, which you capture perfectly.

LEE: That’s scarier than this. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: I lived through it, so I know. (Laughter) But you do that, and capture that perfectly. And then the Civil War period, with *Ride with the Devil* (1999). So could you talk about those? I guess *The Ice Storm* first, because that is such a perfect film in so many ways.

LEE: Well, I guess after five generations—with *Sense and Sensibility*—five generations, my guess is as good as anybody’s. I realized that once I did the research, I did half-a-year of learning, tuned into the material, I’m no less knowledgeable than people around me. Except that I’m not as familiar with the theatrical reality, as much as people, let alone audience and critics alike. So that was my real struggle. Give me like, three months, I can get into; I feel I can get into anything.

So once I spent half a year in preproduction with that movie, I felt more and more confident. But *The Ice Storm* is really scary because to me, that was the nearest, at that time, the nearest period drama. People still remember that year. And I was in Taiwan. So that was scary. The first research I did when I interviewed people about the ice storm

that year, I got so scared, because everybody gave me a signal; like they don’t remember 1973. That’s really scary. They remember what happened ’72, ’74. (Laughter) But I think ’73 is the year they intend to forget.

SCHWARTZ: They block it out.

LEE: They block it out. I realize I had walked into a minefield or something. I was very scared. More scared than *Sense and Sensibility*. But James is very helpful, and I think the crew was very helpful. Not so much with actors. I think on the parents’ level, they’re already out of college. So they’re not really social with the kid. And the kid had no idea. (I’m talking about actors.) But the crew is almost my age, like James. The editors, the researcher, script supervisor—just about everybody around me. The problem is who to listen to, because they can be very opinionated. Starting from James’ rewrite, which—I think half the movie is not in the novel. James created.

SCHWARTZ: Well, the tone is very different.

LEE: The tone is very different.

SCHWARTZ: Not as much overtly...

LEE: I don’t hate his parents, that’s the main difference. I’m not as pissed as the writer. I didn’t quite like the ending, so I struggled with it. So we changed it. I told James. This is the first time James entirely wrote the screenplay. I think it’s a brilliant work, adaptation.

SCHWARTZ: It is. (Applause)

LEE: In Cannes, I received Best Screenplay for him. He was sick, he couldn’t make it. I just realized I never treat him like a writer; I always treat him like a producer. Like, “James, I need a few pages. Give me something.” (Laughter) I never respect him as a writer. But he did pull that off.

SCHWARTZ: I want to ask you: What’s great about the collaboration and the way that the screenplays work is you know how to under-write, in a way; or allow silence, and allow a lot to be expressed with no dialog. And of course, in this film, you have characters who keep everything

under the surface. So could you talk a bit about how that works?

SCHAMUS: I mean, *Ice Storm* was so funny as an experience, just being a producer on set. The longest argument probably ever occurred on an Ang Lee film was between forty crew members discussing which of the art department bongs should be in the basement set. (Laughter) “No, no, no, they would’ve had the brown one...” And we were like, “You guys were all so stoned anyhow. Like, you still are. Who remembers? You know, just shut up.” (Laughs) That was a funny thing.

It was so weird, because we were shooting up in New Canaan, Connecticut, where the novel took place—and Rick Moody came and visited. It was just an incredible experience with Rick, the novelist, to be part of that, too. It was so strange being up there shooting it, because they figured out what we were doing pretty quickly up there, and suddenly they were revoking permits, I had to buy off people... It was crazy, and they were so mean. If anybody here is from New Canaan, we hate you! We hate you! (Laughter) Actually, no, we love you! (Laughter) From the bottom of my heart; you know, you gave us this great gift. But I remember one day Ang was sitting outside, and we were just—and somebody shut down, they pulled the—and he was literally like, “Why do they hate me so much? They were so nice in England.” They really were. We have a shot of all these National Trust houses, where only the volunteers can move the chairs and stuff, and the crew couldn’t do it. We had this big, burly British crew, and they’re saying, “Well, let’s move the chairs.” Literally, four eighty-year-old women had to come and move the chairs. (Laughter)

LEE: With the chairs in their arms... (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: That movie’s so priceless, you know. We were like, “We got the crew. They can do that.” “No, no, no...” But in New Canaan, they were just so mean. And he goes, “Why are they so mean?” I said, “Ang, the reason you live here is because you hate people like you.” (Laughter) You know, this is the thing. But so writing it was this crazy thing, because I didn’t grow up in that kind of environment either, so I had to pretend that I knew all this stuff. But honestly, I grew up...

LEE: He says that because his dad’s sitting right there.

SCHAMUS: Yes, yes. (Laughter) Hi, Dad! His parties, I assume, were much more boring. But it was this kind of strange thing, were you really were identifying—or we were able to identify, like, with both generations: Being a kid at that time; but also, we were both parents.

I’ll never forget, one of the longest discussions we ever had about the script was on the potential line reading that Kevin Kline would give to one very, very small line, which was, “Uh, I mean it, young lady!”—which of course, is the line that parents give when they are absolutely helpless and don’t mean anything! It was a very funny discussion we had. That was kind of the essence, after the first three movies, which were all about these patriarchs having to adapt to this new world, and then flipping it into splitting it between the kids...

LEE: We ourselves are dads, and we’re clueless in America, so that’s how we associate with... It’s a switch from the previous movies to this one.

SCHAMUS: And really, the scariest thing about working on that screenplay, which has now been fully realized—and I was talking to Joan Allen about this as we were waiting before, this evening—is now, ten years later, we get to show that movie to our kids.

SCHWARTZ: Hm.

SCHAMUS: Yes! (Laughter) Oh, they’ve seen it all. You know, they’re on the internet, what do we care? But it is that kind of moment when you really, you see all those cycles turning.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of the amount that you write, there are long sequences. I mean, famously, the whole ending sequence of this film, there’s no dialog. And it’s a long time.

LEE: He leaves a lot of room for the filmmakers. That’s why sometimes I treat him like a producer, not writer. Sometimes I think that’s a benefit for a filmmaker. You know, most scripts I’ve read from Hollywood, from wherever, they’re built like battleships. Unsinkable. If I drop the script,

somebody picks it up—he or she can direct. That’s the kind of script they want.

But James’ is blueprint, minimum. But very suggestive, very inspirational. Very stimulating for the thoughts. But he keeps it to the minimum, and you feel like you want to make a movie about it. So that’s the best thing about his screenplay writing. Maybe he doesn’t think of himself as a scriptwriter. (Laughs) But he’s a filmmaker to me. He’s a filmmaker.

SCHAMUS: I do, actually! (Laughter) I do!

LEE: Well, you don’t have to strike now.

SCHAMUS: Yes; I’m picketing myself right now. (Laughter) But there is a thing, because I often—now that I have the studio job, it’s a little busy, so I don’t do as much, but in the past, I’ve often managed doing these studio film rewrites. Which are hilariously fun, because they’ve just committed like, \$100 million, and they forgot there was no story! (Laughter) They call you up, and it’s just, like, “Combat pay, alright!”

But it’s like engineering, because you have to take, literally, the sets that they’ve built and the characters, and you have to write into their production and figure out a story for them. You don’t get credited, but they pay you wonderfully, and it’s great craft; I learn a lot. But it is the exact opposite of what I do for Ang, which really, for Ang... Well, any really original script is going to be what I call “120 Pages of Begging for Money and Attention,” because that’s what they are when you’re in that zone, not when you’re doing combat work.

But for him, it’s really making him so scared that he’ll be interested, because he reads a lot, you can imagine, after almost twenty years. He gets like, every screenplay from everybody. And they’re wonderful scripts, often, and he’s bored silly. Which is really too bad, because I think, like, if I could just tag along as producer on some of those, it would be so much fun and there’d be so much money, and we’d be so happy and successful. (Laughter) So stress-free... but he just gets bored. So I really do try to write stuff that will scare him enough, you know?

SCHWARTZ: A lot of motivation in fear.

SCHAMUS: Yes.

LEE: I was so scared of this. I was so scared of this. This is a good lesson for me. Unlike film school experience with *Sense and Sensibility*, which is really the movie that nailed my craft in filmmaking. I think that book is made like textbook stuff. But I was getting away from that. And because the material is so scary, I found it so scary, I actually had to detach from it. I’m not a person to say that I know what I’m talking about, because they’re all chatting like this, I have to try to decide who to listen to a lot of the times.

But then I found myself easier than everybody, probably even James, to see the subtext, what it’s about, what’s behind it, because the texture doesn’t attach to me as much as some of the earlier films. So I realize to make art, to craft some artistic work, you need a distance. Because I was scared, there’s a distance.

First, in *Sense and Sensibility*, I learned to step back from the actors, because I’m so afraid of them. So actually, I put a camera—before, my camera was here; then it was way back, to try to decide how to frame them. So *Sense and Sensibility*, you know, the framing will speak for itself. Then with *The Ice Storm*, I take one further step back. I think that’s still, up to this day, the most artistic film I’ve tried, because of certain factors, I have to make craft into art, instead of imposing myself. So that was a good lesson.

SCHAMUS: But there are these funny little, you know, just contingencies that dictate, eventually dictate what you think of as Ang’s craft. On *Sense and Sensibility*, he was absolutely certain he wanted to shoot it widescreen... until we did some hair and makeup and costume tests, and then you realized that empire dresses don’t have the shoulder, so they’re here. And then they have the hat up here. And so...

LEE: Hat and cleavages.

SCHAMUS: So if you wanted to see the hat, they’d look naked. (Laughter) It’s like Kate was walking around naked, wearing a hat! (Laughter) We

looked at the close-up and we thought, “Oh, it’s not...” So then we went back to the standard.

SCHWARTZ: You’ve famously said about *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that sometimes when you would write a fight scene, you’d just write: “They fight.”

LEE: They fight, yes. (Laughter) We did put a note in the front page just, “Trust Ang will create the most incredible fighting sequence in history.”

SCHAMUS: Yeah, it’s just incredible what a good screenplay can get you. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Were you afraid of taking on this genre? It’s incredibly popular.

LEE: No, I wasn’t thinking, I guess. It’s just something I wanted to do. Again, I pitched him the story: “This is a saga in martial arts, something, something.” I remember we were at the Toronto Film Festival, and he took me to a video game shop to run away from a party. (Laughter) I remember in that video game, I said, “I want to do a martial arts film about this young girl, blah-blah-blah.” He said, “I think it’s a great idea. (Laughs) You can do a martial arts film.” Then we started it. First draft was done by him. It was very brief, just to get money. And then I had Wang Hui-Ling, the Chinese writer, to work on the script, back and forth.

SCHWARTZ: Who you worked with on *Eat Drink Man Woman*, and the current new film, too, right?

SCHAMUS: Yes, it’s transatlantic writing ping-pong.

SCHWARTZ: Yes, what is that like?

LEE: Through bad translation... lost in translation. (Laughter)

SCHAMUS: Yes. He’s basically this weird—I would say a medium. But basically, the scripts don’t even get past him. It’s very painful for him, because we go back and forth. But we’ve been doing this now for almost two decades, and it’s... Some of them, I really...
On this, my draft was just, I thought it was really great, and Chinese people would literally read it and look at me with that look, that I now

understand (Laughter) which is when people are so polite and they’re looking at you like, “This guy’s so fucked up. (Laughter) You wrote that?” I mean, really, it was so crazy because I didn’t know the Wu Xia genre, I didn’t know the linguistic and the cultural side of it, and I wrote a very narrative version of the story, which essentially, in its broad strokes, you’ll see in the film. But it’s literally—I finally described it as if some Chinese guy wrote a John Wayne movie where the guy walks into town and asks for the Sheriff, and sees him, and then kowtows ten times. (Laughter) Like that’s normal, you know? I did a lot of that. So I think that was the hardest process you ever had, to manage the transatlantic...

LEE: Yes, halfway into shooting it—that’s the most terrible time I can remember making a movie. Not only because it was very hard to make, but halfway into shooting, I was still working on the script. That’s the hardest thing, to work on a script and shooting at the same time. You don’t know where it’s going.

I think I just always wanted to do action things, but I started off doing domestic drama, and then I got bored after *The Ice Storm*. You skipped one movie, *Ride with the Devil*. That’s the first time I tried action, boys with guns and on horseback... and then getting to this.

I don’t know if it makes sense, because this is a B-genre. Supposedly, you sit back eating popcorn and you don’t think about it. But when I actually tried to carry out my childhood fantasy, I’m dealing with my midlife crisis as well, so it’s a lot of mature—I mean, as a grownup, and as the way I make movies is pretty much art-house. I want to bring drama and historical stuff, culture, what I think is missing in today’s Chinese culture—everything, I try to stuff it in, into this one fantasy film where people fly. So I didn’t really know what I was doing, actually. (Laughter; he laughs) I just jammed all of them in and tried to make sense of what I’m trying to do.

SCHAMUS: This is the theme for tonight: Fear and ignorance. (Laughter)

LEE: It makes sense to me. I don’t know how the world is going to see [it]. By that time, I’ve done three English language films. That gave me the clout to require whatever I want in China, and a

bigger budget, bigger allowance from the bank, whoever, the money people, for this kind of production. So it was possible; it's a unique case. Since I'm president, I don't have any example to learn from, or anybody who can teach me how to do anything. So that was the movie. (Laughs) That's movie making.

SCHWARTZ: You jump from that into *Hulk*, which is very similar to what you're talking about, where it's got the love of action movies, making a big entertaining movie, but stuffed with real psychodrama and very visually inventive, in a way. I don't think it has been appreciated for the inventiveness of what you did visually.

LEE: The image he smashed? That was my wife's work. She's a microbiologist, medical biologist. She works late hours everyday, works longer hours than I do. So something I always wanted to do, ransack the whole lab! (Laughter) But that's not the rage I have; my rage is something else.

SCHAMUS: No, not at all.

SCHWARTZ: Well, talk about what this film was for you. It was certainly your biggest production; I think the biggest production for Universal, in its history.

LEE: I'm very proud of the movie. I think the sales of the movie didn't give the film a good shot. It's really a psychodrama. If it can be a, let's say a Focus film, specialized film, gradually platformed—but that's not possible, I guess. We have to have the first weekend.

Well, after *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, for a while I was wrecked. But on the other way, we both feel maybe it's time to try something bigger. In a way, I thought of *Terminator 3* (2003)... But oh, there's too much emotional baggage. It's not original. You're not going to do anything original. And then James mailed this project out of Universal. He's thinking... Well, you can explain better what it is. I pondered about it. I thought that would be the extension of what I do in China: take a genre, a pulpy genre, and deal with the hidden psychology of the culture.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, the hidden dragon is, to me, the repressed sexuality, you

know. So I think that's the emotional truth to Chinese psychology. Something I dig up from, let's say, the dark side of the moon. Things we don't really see. So I'm into that, and I'm into pulpy. When you do something pulpy, it takes a lot of money, and you have to work with the system. That was kind of the kick for me back then. Let's do something ten times bigger—literally ten times bigger. So there was the *Hulk*. James found out—he can tell what came about—and then he wrote the screenplay by himself. And we spent months talking about what we want to get into. But eventually, it's still father/son relationship. It's still family drama, actually.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk a bit about what you were trying to do?

LEE: It was a great feeling, making that movie. For two years. I feel that each image I made on computer, I took 300 people with me. I put on the dress, the motion capture suit.

SCHWARTZ: *You were wearing it?*

LEE: I played the Hulk.

SCHWARTZ: Really?

LEE: It's my face, my body movement. I was the Hulk. It was so therapeutic.

SCHAMUS: Fun to be around! (Laughter)

LEE: Every picture I work on is like artwork. It's like oil painting to me. I enjoy it so much—and ultimate freedom. People are saying that independents are supposed to... When you have no money, you're noble, you're independent. When you make a big movie, you're a sell-out. It didn't happen to me. To me, that's the ultimate freedom. Even money is not an issue. You just do whatever you want! (Laughs) Ultimate indulgence. And then the *Hulk* sort of comes out, and that's how I got what I was reaching for.

SCHWARTZ: And you took the idea of these comic book graphics to allow you to be very visually inventive. I mean, there's so much...

LEE: It's a rhapsody. Starting from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, I realized I'm out of things

I'm familiar with to say. I started getting to subconsciousness. So the way of *Sense and Sensibility* becomes *Hulk*, or *Lust, Caution*. In a way it becomes like this. So I'm touching down, like peeling onions, layer by layer—and it's getting scarier and scarier. Each time I make a movie, for the last four movies—

SCHAMUS: And more ignorant and ignorant.
(Laughter)

LEE: Something you don't know, and while you're doing it you think, "This is the last movie I want to make." It's like there's no tomorrow. I was kind of getting into that zone. And he's still very supportive, and writing and selling and inspiring, in every front.

SCHAMUS: We had a funny experience with it, because we pitched it as going to Universal and saying, "We're going to take this Marvel property..." (and I'd written some Marvel pictures before, and had a great experience with that) "...And we're going to go back to classic Universal horror. The darkest, the coolest, and the most repressed and most kind of viciously psychological horror tradition you can find. And it's still in the studio system." That was a wonderful thing, and everybody really bought into it. As we were in preproduction, a little movie opened that had been made by Sony, another Marvel movie, called *Spider-Man* (2002).
(Laughter) And it defined what a Marvel movie was.

I'll never forget going to see the picture and going, "Uh-oh, we are in trouble, because there's no way—the expectation of what a Marvel picture is going to be..." And we knew. So the film was marketed as a *Spider-Man* movie, when we had made this kind of very dense, creepy...

Luckily, Universal made many, many more movies, far more expensive than this one, and the *Hulk* hands alone put it in the profit—you know, those Hulk hands, those big, green hands? But it did become a kind of critical bad object. It has that kind of, you know, aura of like, "Wow, I kind of screwed up there." And to me, that was part of the process of seeing how you're working in the culture and going through it. And the script did have a few jokes in it, you know? It did. But it went

to this wonderful place where I really, I truly believe now... you look at it. The things that Ang was doing then—it wasn't that long ago...

LEE: I thought it was very innovative. I was so proud of it.

SCHWARTZ: It was, yes.

LEE: I thought it was going to wow people, but... Just seeing them react is... (Laughter) So scary.

SCHAMUS: Well, one of the things is, it doesn't end... *Spider-Man* ends, as you know, with a close-up of an American flag. As we were making the picture, of course, 9/11 happened. And you know, this is a movie about something created by the American military-industrial complex, which then blows back and fights it in a desert, while Natacha Atlas music, Arab music, is on the soundtrack. So there was a little bit of like, "Well, what are these guys actually saying?" feel at the time. There was a real... you know, this seems like so long ago, when there was that kind of patriotic fervor that hit, and there was a subtext of, "Guys, you're being a little icky here."

LEE: Strange thing. Once I'm outside of America, everybody asks me about that, the subtext.

SCHWARTZ: The subtext about its relation to the Middle East...

SCHAMUS: ...Politics.

LEE: Yes. What is this American fear? What do you think of America today? You know, like everybody in the world is talking about it, except Americans. Nobody asked me that question here. It's a strange thing.

SCHAMUS: Yes, there wasn't any real—yes, it's funny. It was really kind of a repressed....

LEE: Can you figure out why?

SCHAMUS: I don't think people wanted to see...

LEE: ...Make that connection, yes.

SCHAMUS: On the other hand, actually...

SCHWARTZ: This came out a year after 9/11.

SCHAMUS: Yes. While people were really getting into... you know, while we starting to get bogged down there. On the other hand, it did end up being... tracking, for example, African American and Latino audiences, it was probably the biggest film of the year. So there was a sense of people of those communities connecting.

LEE: African Americans also hits pretty big, I think.

SCHAMUS: Yes, this was a huge picture in those communities. I think they got the politics of it implicitly.

LEE: A very strange experience for me. By the time we released it, the studio seems to freak out. They're very nervous. And we're very nervous.

SCHWARTZ: But it seemed very in keeping, now looking at it, it seems very of a piece with all of your work. Even this time, in watching all your films together, I even saw a connection with *Brokeback Mountain*, because there's a moment—we're going to jump to that now—with Heath Ledger's character, that almost... I almost think he's going to turn into the Hulk, but instead, what he does is get married. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: One thing I thought of, just seeing this, it must've been sort of liberating for you to be making a film out in nature, after doing this heavy computer graphics studio film.

LEE: These two, *Hulk* and *Brokeback*, came about the same time. Similar time. If *Hulk* didn't happen, I might have done that. That tells you it doesn't matter. You know, I don't have a plan. "Next one has to be big, or Chinese..." I didn't really have a plan. I can do the smallest, or big as *Hulk*. So I chose to do the *Hulk*. I was in a mood to do that, right? *Brokeback*. After I was wrecked, I was further wrecked doing the *Hulk*. And finally, it dealt with anger and I dealt with the agony of releasing the film. I blew up, finally, the father image. A few months after that, my father passed away. I was really a wreck. And physically, I just felt very ill.

And James got that right, *Brokeback*. He can tell the story. I said to James, "I'm not sure if I can finish this. I don't know what my condition is. If

you want me to do it, you have to promise one thing; don't make me angry." (They laugh) I made a joke about, "You won't like me when I'm angry." I'm kind of wrecked. I just can not take any more excitement.

Shortly before my father passed away, he said, "Go ahead, make another movie." For the first time, he encouraged me to make a movie. So I thought, "I'll pick this one. I'll see how far it goes." And James kept his promise. Anything gets in my way, he'll try to deal with that. He was very hands off this one with me. He always gave me what I need. I need quietness; I need to recover from the previous two movies; or whatever that accumulated to that point. I need to love everybody around me, myself. I need to have peace with my own body. All that, I sort of used that to come back. If I do nothing, stay home, it's nerve wracking to me. I get more sensitive. So that movie sort of brought me back to health. Also, my love to filmmaking and people. It basically finished the day.

The shooting style is very simple, goes back to how I shot *Pushing Hands*. I felt like I was relearning, restart the career, and relearn how to make movies. For the first time I felt, sometimes I felt I was kind of maturing. And that was a good decision. I didn't use much of the anger, you know, to solve that problem, deal with that. And I felt pretty much at ease. Just make the days. Try to keep within budget. After the *Hulk*, actually, we went quite a few million over. That was nothing to me. "James, only a few million; man, don't worry about it." (Laughter)

And he green light—he had Focus back then—he green-lit the picture and was very supportive, and hands off. Just tried to get rid of problems I might run into, or any potential conflicts. It was bliss. I never felt so happy and so much love on set in making a movie. I was really at ease. I think the movie is what it is, and I think people appreciate modesty. That's not forced. That's like a fall. I was so exhausted, I fall back to that. So that was the mood that made this movie. So a very unique working experience.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of the screenplay, going from the short story and expanding, in a way, could

you talk a bit about what was that? Because one thing that's actually...

LEE: Larry and Diana did the screenplay.

SCHWARTZ: Right. Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana did the screenplay. But adding the family drama again; I mean, more of the family. The female characters are one thing that's expanded in the adaptation.

SCHAMUS: And that was definitely on Ang's... I had tried to make the movie for six years, as an independent producer at Good Machine with a number of different directors. And it just was, "No, thank you. No, thank you. No, thank you." It was a great script. When we got Focus together, and suddenly I was the asshole on the other side of the desk saying, "No, thank you," you know, "Uh-oh, I guess I have to say thanks.... yeah!" There was that weird moment. It was like, back to fear as a motif, when Ang came on. But then Ang's direction really expanded the children and the family, the whole thing. I think it gave their—Not because it was like, "Oh, let's have more women's drama in the movie."

LEE: It legitimized the story.

SCHAMUS: It gave their relationship a centrality, in a way that it might not otherwise have had.

SCHWARTZ: We're going to jump now to the current film, which has just opened in theaters here, *Lust, Caution*, which is an amazing movie. Basically these two characters; Tony Leung plays a spy who's working for the Japanese government just occupying China; and Tang Wei gives an amazing performance as—she's part of the resistance, and she's opposed to—just like Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious* (1946)—court him in order to get rid of him.

SCHAMUS: It's the smoking that got us the NC-17, I should say. (Laughter) The way she smokes. It's just, that did it. They just went crazy at the MPAA. But it is amazing. I mean, she's playing this role who's a young student who just...

LEE: Good girl plays bad girl.

SCHWARTZ: Well, I mean, these performances; you're not going to see better performances all year than these two. Because it's all a film about acting and about the whole idea of performance. Tony Leung, and I believe that Tang Wei's here!

SCHAMUS: Here's Tang Wei right here. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Please stand up!

SCHAMUS: Just like in the movie, by the way, out of 10,000 actresses who applied for the job, this is her first film. Very first movie. It's incredible. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Yes, it's unbelievable. As I said, everything is about this whole question about acting, about fear, because you don't know what the other person is up to. And the sex in the film, which is what has been in the press so much, is all about this same idea. I mean, that it's...

LEE: Yes, about performance. In some ways, I think sex is about performance. I don't know if you agree with that... (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, in this film. It's very different than *Brokeback*, because it's a very different approach and the sex...

LEE: To me, they're like sister movies, somehow. Both of them very short—brilliant short stories written by gutsy, brilliant women writers—and then we expand to (well, I expand to) (Laughs) feature length, pretty lengthy feature length film. They're both about, at heart, to me, romantic love. The impossible romantic love. However, I think *Brokeback* is more of a vague idea. It's just pure. When they're on Brokeback Mountain, they didn't know what happens. It's like Eden. And then they try, the next twenty years, try to get back. They can't, they missed it. So it's more like an idea of heaven, and this is the hell to me. Like, down, dirty and real... And Chinese. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Could you just talk about the experience of working on it? Because this was an adaptation that you worked on. Again, as Ang said, a very short story; I think twenty-eight pages, the original story. So could you talk about this?

LEE: I started work on the screenplay with Wang Hui-Ling for a few drafts, and then translated to James, because he's producing it. See if this time we don't need James to touch it up. Guess what happened? (Laughs) And then back and forth. This time, because of the experience I had before, I was more hands on, made sure James' great ideas, that upgrade the movie—and also, enhance, in a dramatic way. No Chinese writer would dare to touch Eileen Chang's story. Like the stabbing scene. Like, it's a great idea; I know you're going to wake up the audience in the middle of the movie, but Eileen Chang didn't write it. (Laughs)

So we had that fear. But it's proven, for the movie, it's worth it. It's a great idea. Things like that. But other than that, he's just such a superior genre writer. The dialog, the smart dialog, the situations, the mood... So he touched up; and we go through Hui-Ling Wang; and me in the middle; back and forth, back and forth. But the script was in very good shape, I think, before we started shooting. Based on the fearful experience I had with *Crouching Tiger* inside, I want to make sure that doesn't happen again. Except that one speech, the monologue [inaudible] is giving.

SCHAMUS: Yes, when Tang Wei tells Old Wu and [inaudible] just what's going on in her mind during all the sex, and how she wants them to come in and kill Tony Leung, and that kind of crazy speech—we worked extensively on that.

LEE: In the first few drafts, it's not even in there. Once it's there, he writes, she writes, he writes, she writes. Basically, I have to know how the first sex scene landed before I can touch it. Only I know what happened. Only I experienced the intensity of shooting the sex scenes. So that happened early in the shooting, five-month

shooting schedule. I figured I have to do that in Hong Kong, before I go to China. Also, without that, I don't know how to craft the second half. So the sex scene's very important for me.

SCHWARTZ: The sex scenes really inform the entire movie.

LEE: Yes. So I did the sex scenes, and I talked to them again. But nobody experienced what I experienced except me and the actors. So at the end, that speech, I had to finalize it. I struggled with it for a couple months, and finally, sort of nailed it, I think nailed it, two weeks before shooting. That's toward the end of the shoot. I think this time it goes much smoother than the others among the three of us.

SCHAMUS: Yes.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Well, unfortunately, we're going to have to end. I think we're all eager to know what you're going to be afraid of next, (Laughter) to do your next film.

SCHAMUS: You know what he's afraid of? He found out, like, five minutes before we got onstage, he said, "They pay \$25 to come?" (Laughter) He said, "Uh-oh, we better be entertaining!" you know? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Museum members paid less, so...

SCHAMUS: Museum members paid less.

SCHWARTZ: Yes. (Laughter) Well, thank you!

SCHAMUS: Thank you.

LEE: Thank you. (Applause)

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

Copyright © 2008, Museum of the Moving Image.

TRANSCRIPT: A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ANG LEE AND JAMES SCHAMUS

PAGE 19