

Tim Squyres talks about "Crouching Tiger"

NOTE FROM NORMAN -- In my opinion, CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON was one of the more exciting films of 2000, with a deft handling of all elements -- from performance, to production values, to post-production editorial, music, sound and CGI. It comes as no surprise how thoughtful the editing process was. In this interview from EditorsNet, editor Tim Squyres describes the thought processes that go into the film. This is an excerpt from a longer interview, in which they Squyres about musical choices, among other things. The complete interview can be read on the class web site or on EditorsNet.

The Tao and the 10,000 Takes: Tim Squyres Edits "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"
By Neal Romanek

In 1992, Tim Squyres edited Ang Lee's first feature, "Pushing Hands" (Tui Shou). Since then, the two have collaborated on six films, including 1993's "The Wedding Banquet" (Hsi Yen), 1994's "Eat Drink Man Woman" (Yin Shi Nan Nu), "Sense and Sensibility" (1995), "The Ice Storm" (1997) and "Ride With the Devil" (1999). In their latest effort, Sony Pictures Classics' "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (Wu Hu Zang Long), a magnificent sword called the Green Destiny is stolen by young martial arts prodigy Jen Yu (played by Zhang Ziyi). Sword masters Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) and Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) try, by turns, to capture, kill, teach and rescue her as she pursues her single-minded desire to become a roaming warrior in the criminal underworld of medieval China.

What kind of influence has Lee had on you as a film editor?

I've grown up as an editor editing his films, and he's grown up as a director with me editing his films. As far as features go, Ang's films have been the bulk of my career. Our collaboration has really always been a matter of developing, growing and learning. The footage has gotten so much better over the years, as he has gotten better, his budgets have gotten bigger, and his actors have gotten better. It's really nice to get better and better material to work with. The first film -- and even "The Wedding Banquet" to some extent -- was at least half about avoiding the problems. It was only with "Eat Drink Man Woman" when the job began to be about bringing out and refining the good stuff, rather than avoiding the bad stuff.

With "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," did anything change in the way you worked together?

I had to adapt it a little bit because "Crouching Tiger" was shot somewhat differently than his other films. There were many more takes than usual, and we worked on a much tighter schedule. Between assembly and locking picture, we only had seven weeks, which is quite short, so there were some steps that we usually go through that we condensed a little bit. Normally we don't work on the weekends, but during those seven weeks we worked at least one day every weekend.

What was it like cutting the action scenes?

There are two types of action scenes in the film: fight scenes and chase scenes. A chase scene involves minimal choreography. There are a bunch of shots, but they can be rearranged. Fight scenes are much harder. The fights are very carefully choreographed and tightly planned. Sometimes sections can be omitted,

but everything is really planned to fit together a certain way. The problem with this film was that I didn't know what that way was. We had some communication problems, with the language barrier and the set being so many time zones away. I was getting the notes very late, and there wasn't much in the way of explaining the choreography to me. Sometimes they would shoot in sequence, and sometimes they wouldn't. Sometimes I had indications about what order the shots were supposed to go in, but more often I didn't. It was really kind of a jigsaw puzzle. It's an intellectual exercise rather than an artistic exercise, in a way -- just trying to figure out what the choreography was supposed to be, especially when sometimes some of the pieces were missing.

What was the most challenging sequence to cut?

The most challenging part of cutting the film was cutting the dialogue scenes. When Ang came back from the shoot in China and we started working together, the first thing we did was the fight scenes. We did that because of all the effects work that had to be done on those scenes -- all of the wire removal. Normally we would cut in sequence, but in this case, because of the scheduling problems and because of all the effects work, we isolated the fight scenes. That process took a couple of weeks, and then the last five weeks we really just spent on the story. Story-wise, there were a number of things that had to be moved around, changed, rewritten, shortened and deleted. That took a long time, and in a way it was more difficult than the action scenes. With the action scenes, I had them fairly close before Ang ever came back from China. They certainly take a long time to put together. Some of the fight scenes had more than 200 set-ups. And there were many, many takes of these setups. I'd get a scene with 700 or 800 takes -- which is not what I'm used to - and all of them are six or eight seconds. It takes a long time to wade through all the dailies, figure out the sequence of events and determine with each one which take is best. But then the scene comes together pretty quickly.

What is it about the dialogue scenes that makes them more challenging?

One thing that makes it challenging is that I don't speak Mandarin.

What is that like? What do you do when you're not using the dialogue as a cue?

I am listening to the dialogue. On a film like "Eat Drink Man Woman," which is also in Mandarin, I had a good English version of the script. I do know a fair amount of Mandarin vocabulary, but I have no concept of Mandarin grammar at all. I know individual words here and there, and usually, sentence by sentence, I can tell what's being said. What I can't tell is things about inflection. To a certain extent, the emotional meaning of things is often held in the little details of a performance -- I can hear that in English, but I can't hear it in Mandarin. Mandarin is a complicated language. It has all sorts of different tones and different ways of accenting each syllable that affect the meaning, and I'm familiar with those sounds. If an actor messes up a line, if they know they messed up the line, I also know they messed up the line, because I'll always catch it if there's any kind of hesitation or break in the rhythm. If they just mispronounce a syllable or say the wrong word and just keep barreling on like it was no problem, I might not catch it. But a performance is about a lot of things besides the lines, and I just do the best I can. I choose based on the variables to which I have access. Once Ang is involved, we go back and look at everything. When I work in English, we end up changing a few takes. When we work in Mandarin, we change a little bit more, but not much.

Did Lee ever completely surprise you?

One thing that surprised me was the large number of takes and setups in the choreographed fight scenes. But there were also several dialogue scenes with a lot of takes. Ang really went piece by piece and moved people around in the room. In a dialogue scene with two people in a room talking, it was common to

have fifteen setups. It was an interesting way of shooting and blocking the scenes.

Lee doesn't shoot a lot of regular coverage?

Yes, and even less so in "Crouching Tiger" than in any of his other films. He really broke it up. He was limited in the scenes with Michelle Yeoh because she injured her knee fairly early in the shoot and couldn't walk very well. She would be in one position, and then at some point in the scene she would walk across the room, sit down and pour tea. That was about as much movement as she could do. So the scenes with her are a little more static because she was physically limited, but even so, Ang rarely parked her in one place. There are really only two scenes where she just stays in one place, and I wonder if he would have done things differently if she had been able to walk.

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