

Jackie Chan, the clown prince of martial arts

by Joey_Berlin

The clown prince of martial arts, Jackie Chan was a huge action star in Asia before he took a flying leap into American theaters. It was not long before he realized his dream of translating that huge popularity overseas into Hollywood bankability, when "Rush Hour" became a box-office hit.

JACKIE CHAN - Jackie Chan stars as Lu Yan in the action film 'The Forbidden Kingdom.' CNS Photo courtesy of Chan Kam Chuen.

Now, the kung-fu master known for his crazy stunts and imaginative prop work is uniting with the big screen's other international martial arts superstar, Jet Li, for "The Forbidden Kingdom." A PG-13-rated action adventure, the film follows a modern American teenager who gets transported to ancient, mythical China. Chan plays a master of "drunken style" kung-fu fighting and Li is a stoic monk (they also appear in secondary roles: Chan as a mysterious old man and Li as the legendary Monkey King).

With choreography by Yuen Woo-ping, "The Forbidden Kingdom" has spectacular fight scenes that the 54-year-old Chan still pulls off with remarkable athleticism.

Q: You and Jet Li have known each other for a long time. Was filming your fight scene together different than others you have done?

A: I just remember the first day we were on the set, Woo-ping and the stunt coordinators had choreographed an action sequence. Jet and I go to take a look. Two stunt guys do a demonstration of it, and I'm standing there with Woo. You know, I am a fast learner. I have been doing action for so many years. I just look at it once and say, "Just show me one more time." And then I say, "Let's shoot without rehearsal." And then I look at Jet, and Jet Li's like, "OK, let's shoot." After the first cut, the director and Woo-ping come up and say, "Good, but can you guys slow down?" Because Jet wanted to show off his quickness, I wanted to show off my quickness. I wanted quicker! Fighting with him is very, very comfortable. And I think because I'm good, it makes him comfortable (laughs).

Q: You are known to be very critical of your work. So are you pleased with the way "The Forbidden Kingdom" has turned out? Is it as you imagined?

A: I don't know. Every time I make an American film I just trust the American director and the American writer. Myself, I would never make this kind of film. For me, these kinds of films are ridiculous. They don't make sense. But the American audience is more interested in this kind of movie.

Q: That is surprising to hear because the action certainly has your style, especially the Drunken Master fighting. Which part did you think did not make sense?

A: No, the whole thing (laughs). Why Drunken Master? Why Monkey King? It's a fantasy, like a fairy tale. It's OK. Otherwise I won't make this movie, but I know that American people like it. And the Asians like it. So that's why Jet and I agreed to make this movie. Now I hear so many good things about this movie and everybody talks about it. I still worry, just like the first "Rush Hour." After I finished "Rush Hour" I said, "My career is finished. It's the second time I've tried to get in the American market and now I'm finished. I'll go back to Asia and that's all." Then boom! Big hit. I thought, "This is ridiculous. Why? Why do people like these kinds of things?" So now, whenever an American writer or director comes and presents a script, nobody is against it. For the American market, yeah.

Q: You are in your 50s now. What kinds of adjustments have you had to make with your martial arts at your age?

A: I think the last five or six years, you can tell I have changed my style. Right after, I don't know, "Around the World in 80 Days" I went back to make "New Police Story," "The Myth," "Rob-B-Hood," "Rush Hour 3" and "The Forbidden Kingdom." Right after "The Forbidden Kingdom" I just finished a movie called "The Shinjuku Incident." It's just totally heavy, heavy drama, 1 percent action. The next one will be big action! Then maybe a love story. I want to change. I want to be a real actor, not just in the action style. I am the myth. Jackie Chan is a myth. I am still surviving right now, after more than 30 years. I am the only one. How long can I keep fighting? So this is why I have to change, change, change. I'm not like I used to be, like in "Drunken Master." No, I'm tired (laughs).

Q: Did wearing that wig cause any problems?

A: Yes, especially when it was so hot in the desert. It's so itchy, and probably for a young girl they are used to it. So itchy! But there were other things, like playing the old guy, Old Hop. Wow. I wanted to kill the director (laughs). For five days I'd get a call at 4 in the morning for makeup until 12:30. After lunch, first shot. We'd do two shots and wrap. I said, "No, shoot more." Then take off all the makeup for two hours. Every day it was almost 11 hours in makeup.

Q: You used to be a student of martial arts and now you are becoming a master. How does that feel?

A: I just don't believe it's so quick, now that I'm becoming a master. Then I realize, "Wow, 'Drunken Master' was 30 years ago." My master has already passed away. Now I am the master. It feels funny. But yeah, what can you do? That's a human being's life.

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