



I was raised to know Chinese cinema before understanding Hollywood and European films



One for the Brode

He's the youngest man ever to win best actor at the Oscars. Now, having conquered Hollywood, **Adrien Brody** is ready to make a name for himself in the Middle Kingdom. He talks to Arthur Tam about his new production house and being pals with Jackie Chan. Photography by Calvin Sit

When you win the Oscar for best actor at an unprecedented 29 years of age it's tempting to play it safe, to cherry pick your roles and guard your cinematic kudos. But Adrien Brody has never been afraid to task risks. He's as comfortable working alongside industry heavyweights like Roman Polanski, Woody Allen and Wes Anderson as he is pretending to battle King Kong and alien predators. He's even spent seven years making a documentary (*Stone Barn Castle*) focusing on the unfashionable subject of his toil renovating a partially burned mansion in upstate New York. Always looking ahead to his next challenge, the young Oscar and César Award-winner has set his sights on China's burgeoning film industry.

Earlier this year, Brody appeared on screen opposite Jackie Chan, as a corrupt Roman general hell-bent on staking a claim to the riches of the Silk Road in *Dragon Blade*. This military role won him best supporting actor at the Huading Awards (what the *Hollywood Reporter* calls 'China's version of the Oscars'). On top of that, Brody has recently launched his own production house, Fabel House, which aims to produce films that are palatable for Chinese audiences. The company has a huge \$50 million backing from Chinese and Nigerian investors. One of the partners for Fabel House is the Beijing-based production company Sparkle Roll Cultural Media, which is half owned by one of Brody's newest chums, Chan.

The 42-year-old doesn't want to be restricted to acting anymore. He wants to be an entrepreneur

and take more control of his career. And this is what we ask him about over drinks at the Kowloon Shangri-La. He looks sharp and dapper in real life in his grey suit, as he did on billboards as the former ambassador for Ermenegildo Zegna. We begin by asking about the motherland...

When would you say your interest in Chinese films begin?

Growing up I loved Chinese movies. I would watch old martial arts films with my dad. I watched a whole slew of late 70s, early 80s film produced by Run Run Shaw, and early Bruce Lee films too. And in a way, those characters were superheroes to my generation and for me as well. My dad would take me religiously to watch these films every weekend. In a weird way, I was raised to know [Chinese cinema] prior to understanding Hollywood films and European films. I have a strong visceral connection to these martial arts epics from my early years, so I think that's really interesting. And to find myself here all these years later, working with Jackie Chan and playing a martial arts villain and getting recognition from a Chinese audience, it's remarkable.

What was working with Jackie Chan like? He's become quite a polarising character in Hong Kong over the past decade.

It doesn't really affect me. I try to not to get involved with that. It doesn't have bearing unless it's offensive. I grew up admiring him so much. ▶



You can't survive New York with just magic, you need some self-defense

He's one of the greatest, so it was a no brainer for me. I pursued Jackie directly and told him how much I would love to work with him and be a part of *Dragon Blade*. The chemistry is great and he's been really good to me. We're pals.

The interaction with Jackie Chan and his stunt team was exciting and quite the learning experience. I grew up studying martial arts, mostly taekwondo and a bit of karate and wing chun. It helped during the learning process for the fighting sequences. You couldn't survive in New York with just magic [Brody started out working as a magician], you need a little bit of self-defense.

What was the most challenging part about filming *Dragon Blade*?

It was a bit *Mad Max*, it was real. At the end of the day it was a very exciting pursuit. I really felt that I was on the edge of the earth. The Gobi Desert is otherworldly. We also came across this amazing field of sunflowers shielded by this row of trees [Brody proceeds to show us an image of the sunflower field in the desert on his iPhone, which truly looks incredible]. I just stumbled on this on the way to set. It's beautiful. Amid all that desert there was something... beyond life.

What's your usual thought process when you take on a role?

I'm very experimental as an actor. I'm experimental in general. As an actor, I try to take risk intentionally. I try to do things that are innovative and new for me and keep me engaged and hopefully keeps the audience surprised.

Have there been any roles that you ever regret taking?

When you become very visible, you are limited to the perceptions of what people think that you should and should not be doing. And it has an effect, which can be hard to come to terms with. I very much operate the way I have prior to the recognition, to make decisions to be a free artist. I like to play around, whether it's humour or if it's an indie film with a first time filmmaker. The catalyst to become a producer has stemmed from the failure of certain films that were not protected or not cultivated or relayed to me in the process. I was not in a position to control that. Fortunately, it has motivated me and here I am. I'm now at an age where I can hone my skills and have a clear vision as a storyteller. That's all very much in my heart and mind these days.

What's unique about working in China?

There is an abundance of manpower here. It's exciting to see an army of people literally move a set and you can actually see that something is happening. In America, you have your departments and your union rules, and this kind of stuff causes delays. It's protective of people's employment, but at the same time there are limits.

It's a different culture [in China] and you can do some wild stuff. I found it to be an exciting

place, a new territory, even though it already has a significant filmmaking history. I think it's bordering on something new, which is why my company, Fable House, is getting involved. I want to integrate the sensibilities that I've cultivated in Hollywood to help the trajectory of Chinese films expand on a global level. I want to make films [in China], make films with great Chinese actors, filmmakers and great creatives, and integrate the storytelling into what I think could be beneficial for a Chinese audiences and audience outside China as well. I'd like to do that more than Hollywood's idea of throwing in a few Chinese elements to meet the Mainland's quota system.

As an experimental actor who engages in socially impactful films, do you worry about Chinese censorship issues?

I'm conscious of it. My ability to be an experimental actor rests solely on me. I participate in a film based on the material and how it affects me and not whether it is commercially successful. But as a producer I have a different set of responsibilities to make films that are successful for my investors.

Can you tell us a bit about the current projects you're working on? *September of Shiraz?* *Manhattan Nocturne*?

Nocturne is another film that Fable House produced. I'm co-writing some projects. I'm involved in cultivating ideas more enthusiastically and devotedly than I've ever been in my life. It's easier to just be an actor to be honest. This is much more rewarding though.

What's it like working with Wes Anderson?

I love the guy. He's a creative genius. He's a funny guy and he has a unique way of storytelling. I hope our relationship continues to evolve. The fact that he's brought me into the fold is a great honour. We understand each other.

Will *Stone Barn Castle* (Brody's renovation documentary) be released here?

It's hard to tell at the moment. I'm sure *Stone Barn Castle* would be appealing to an audience because there is an obvious obsession with celebrity and personal life. It's very revealing and it's complete renovation porn. We are all interested in home renovation and someone's trials and tribulations about how to fix a house. And imagine me, someone who doesn't know anything about it, trying to be artistic about it – committing to it for seven years. I'm tenacious, I'm crazy.

If you build it they will come.

It's an achievement. The whole journey is that I wanted something very hands on, creative and tangible, because acting is elusive and fictional. Even if you're playing a real life character, you have these experiences and they disappear and you have to step away from it. But this is part of me. ■