

A TALE OF THREE CITIES DOUBLE BILL

Taking the plunge

One of Hong Kong's most versatile and celebrated actors, **Sean Lau Ching-wan** returns to the big screen in period romance drama *A Tale of Three Cities*. He talks to Arthur Tam about those who made Hong Kong great, the evolution of the film industry and why he's been jumping into freezing lakes.

Photography by Calvin Sit

Rough, tough and charming are just a few words to describe Sean Lau Ching-wan. With over 30 years of experience in the movie industry and over 100 films to his name, Lau sits in the company of other legendary figures such as Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung Man-yuk who got their break as actors on television station TVB, before dominating the big screen. ►

Wardrobe by Gieves & Hawkes
Navy wool flannel three-piece suit,
blue denim shirt, navy and grey
stripe wool and silk melange tie

Makeup Monida Tse
Hair Jun Ho @ Suave
Location East Hotel, Hong Kong



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*You have to
overcome
your fears,
simply by
taking a risk*

Wardrobe by Gieves & Hawkes
Plum textured wool jacket, plum textured wool waistcoat, brown wool slim fit chinos, burgundy long sleeve cotton shirt and burgundy silk tie



“The important part isn't what person you're playing, but how that character is written

Although best known for starring in a string of gritty action-thrillers for totemic director Johnnie To – few actors can claim a better run of films than *Too Many Ways to be Number One* (1997), *A Hero Never Dies* (1998) and *Running Out of Time* (1999) – Lau is no one-dimensional, copy-and-paste star. His breakout movie was actually 1993 romance drama, *C'est la Vie, Mon Chéri* and his trophy cabinet groans under the weight of numerous acting awards from across Asia.

On yet another hot streak following separate best actor triumphs at this year's Hong Kong Film Awards (for his acting in psycho-thriller *Insanity 3*) and Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards (for last year's *Overheard 3*), the 51-year-old returns to a more romantic and sensitive role in his latest film. Helmed by acclaimed director Mabel Chung, *A Tale of Three Cities* is a 1930s period drama based on the true story of Jackie Chan's parents and their harrowing journey to escape to Hong Kong through a war-ravaged China.

For an older generation of Hongkongers, mention of this era can bring back distressing memories of hardships faced. Families were separated and many thousands killed. The Second Sino-Japanese War saw the horrifying occupation, rape and murder of civilians in the Kuomintang capital of Nanjing, where an estimated 300,000 people suffered and died. Exacerbating the situation, China was also undergoing a bitter civil war that only added to the chaos. Those caught in the conflict turned to whatever means possible in order to survive.

Lau plays Ah Long, a government border guard who has taken a job as a Kuomintang spy in order to earn enough to take care of his dying wife and two sons. One day, during his patrol, he comes across an opium smuggler named Yue Rong, played by Tang Wei. Instead of arresting her, Ah Long sets her free, setting the stage for their future romance, which takes place – as you've already guessed – across three cities in China.

We meet up with Lau in a hotel suite at the East Hotel in Tai Koo Shing. He's lively, spirited and is nowhere near as brooding as he sometimes seems on camera. He's enthusiastic to talk about his new film and why it's important to remember the hardships faced by those who made Hong Kong what it is today.

A Tale of Three Cities is about the struggles of people escaping to Hong Kong during the Japanese invasion of China. Did your perspective on this period change after filming wrapped up?

Since completing the film I've had a new appreciation about this slice of history. Besides fearing for your life and dealing with starvation, which are common wartime concerns, there's another layer to the situation that surfaces regarding the people around you. They change because of the circumstances. Because of war, a previously upstanding citizen can change into a 'bad' person, because he does what needs to be done in order to survive. During the filming process, the most important part to understand was how the director wanted to approach this topic and which aspect of it she wanted to focus on. ▶



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What captivated you most about the script?

The story represents a previous generation that came to Hong Kong either to escape war, the Communist Revolution or to look for better prospects for their families. My parents did the same. So this generation came to Hong Kong, took root and made this city prosper. This is an era that's really worth reminiscing about. I hope people who watch the film will come out appreciating the struggles that people had to fight through to make Hong Kong a great city. This used to be a fishing village and now it's an epicentre for commerce.

It's been a while since you were in a film that wasn't an action-thriller. Was it easy getting into this period romance-drama?

I think the biggest difference between people now and back then was the level of stress. People used to live quieter and calmer lives, before the war, that were slower and free from technology. It was a simpler time. Not having to be constantly attached to your phone is quite refreshing!

What was it like working with Tang Wei for the first time?

She's a dedicated actress and you find that in every scene she'll dig deep into her emotions to make sure what you're seeing is authentic and genuine. You'll never see her trying to gloss over anything.

What about director Mabel Cheung? She mentioned that you were a great help during a scene where Tang Wei had to be submerged in water.

I had a wonderful experience working with Mabel - she's a proper and conscientious director. This is actually the first time I've ever worked with a female director on a romance film and this could be trend that I rather look forward to in the future.

During the scene the director talked of, Tang Wei is thrown off a boat because there are these border traffickers between the Mainland and Hong Kong who were being chased by customs police. This scene involved a seven-metre deep

that you're breathing actual air, which is rare to find these days.

What were some of your favourite moments during filming?

Working with Mabel and Tang Wei. The whole collaborative process was quite memorable.

What type of role do you enjoy playing most?

The most important part isn't what person you are playing, but how that character is written. Say you are playing a popular character that filmmakers have done over and over again, but it's the same old story. There wouldn't be

“We can't rely on our old hits to define the future of Hong Kong cinema”

diving pool, in which Tang Wei had to be submerged up to three metres. The whole time we were shooting this scene I was next to her, giving her support. Tang Wei isn't a very good swimmer and was quite scared, so I wanted to be there to make sure she wouldn't get hurt.

Are you a good swimmer yourself then?

No [chuckles], but you can say that I'm able to handle it.

During your career were there ever scenes that frightened you so much that you reconsidered doing them?

Of course. Whenever I'm in an action film there might be a scene that requires explosions or other dangerous situations and of course there is a concern. I try my best to understand the whole scene and to ask if all the proper precautions have been met. But at the end of the day, all you can really do is hope that there isn't an accident.

So, basically, you just have to close your eyes and hope for the best? Or is there any specific method you use to build up your courage?

There isn't any special method. Often in films, you will encounter these situations and you have to overcome your fears, simply by taking a risk.

What were some of the major challenges during filming?

Learning the jinghu [a Chinese bowed string instrument] was quite difficult because I didn't have a lot of time to learn it. I had only two months and I needed to make sure my finger movements were accurate. That was one of the challenges. The other was when I had to fall into a lake in Anhui, when it was only four degrees out and extremely cold. I definitely had to muster up some courage to do that scene.

But I really like Anhui province. The area we filmed in is so clean and pure. Every breath you take, you get the sense

any point playing that role because it's redundant. It's more interesting trying to bring a new perspective to an ordinary character.

What does a man who's been in almost 100 films still want from his career?

I just hope that I'll come across more good scripts and characters that I'm interested in playing. It isn't very often that you come across a script and a group of people that you enjoy working with like *A Tale of Three Cities*.

What do you think about the evolution of Hong Kong's film industry? Where do you think the industry is at now?

There is a very obvious problem in front of us. A lot of filmmakers right now are just concerned with the Mainland market and they neglect Hong Kong's market, and as a result, less importance is placed on Hong Kong's film industry. Just look at the ticket sales. If you release a film in China you might get a hundred million tickets sales compared to Hong Kong's few hundred thousand. This is just the reality of it, but what's important is that we have to let people in Hong Kong know that you can survive with a career in film. That's the only way that you can encourage more people to join the industry, which will then in turn lead to industry growth.

There is another point to consider. What exactly is an authentic Hong Kong film? What type of film defines Hong Kong's film industry? Most people would probably point to our genre of cops and robbers films. But if that's the case, something needs to change because the world is continuously evolving. We can't rely on our old hits to define the future of Hong Kong cinema. We have to challenge ourselves in new ways and change. ■

A Tale of Three Cities Opens Thu Sep 3



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