

Ang Lee Regis Dialogue with James Schamus, 2005

Speaker:

We are at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota for a Regis Dialogue with the film director Ang Lee.

Speaker:

Let's start the dialogue.

James Schamus:

You made this film, *Brokeback Mountain*. This is your second truly hot man-on-man action movie since *Wedding Banquet*, and I just want to pretend I'm Wolf Blitzer, who we're missing right now, and ask you, do you think America is ready for *Brokeback Mountain*?

Ang Lee:

I think so. Not 100 percent, of course, nothing's 100 percent. But to my surprise, the way people react to the film is so positive. I think after all, this is a love story. You know, if people really have problem with the gay sex scenes. They get over the hump.

James Schamus:

So to speak.

Ang Lee:

Yeah. They're like, oh, okay. If they don't, they won't come and talk to me. They talk on television or something; they don't talk to me. As far as I could tell, I think love is something really universal and this is the new tools, new steps to get into that universal place. Although it's a very unique texture, but the subtext is about love, of struggling to have a taste of what is that love about? What is the illusion of love? I think people guessed that. Movies seem to singing for me. I think to the audience, for what I could tell. So it did go much broader than I expected. I think we talked about, no, we'll do this for a small art house and selected theaters probably. And you'll tell me after a few days of dailies, Oh we're fine, no pressure. We don't have any problem. We don't have to make a lot of money to make the money back. I always assumed that the movie play in a very limited distribution. I never told you probably, but that's what's in my head.

Ang Lee:

But to see how it works. It's interesting still, to see when it grows wider what would happen. But I'm moved. I have to say that I feel roundly categorized as certain part of American being red or, I mean, life is not that simple and people do care about love, and there are people who won't come to see the movie. If they do, I hope they change their mind or have opinion, but come and check it out and see how you feel. I think it's important to be honest and to check into the deep inside of ourselves and to each other's. This is a human condition. Life is complicated. It's not simple that you can categorize them. It's all mixed up. You know, we mix up cowboys and gay love and see what happens.

James Schamus:

It's basically a blender drink. So many of us who've participated in helping make your movies and who have been watching them and critique them have noticed the evolution of many different kinds of style that's appropriate to each story. We've also noticed a real care and attention to framing and to the visual aspects of your, you're really becoming very well known as a visual storyteller. And clearly when you have people who just mumble a few lines in the feature film, you'd better be telling the story visually cause there's not that much else to follow. You grew up in a household that was pretty academic. Your father was a high school principal.

Ang Lee:

He would like to think we're academic, we're not. He's a high school—

James Schamus:

The household. I didn't say you were, but how did you—

Ang Lee:

He was my high school principal, and it was one of the best high schools in Taiwan.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

So that's where I get all the repression and stuff.

James Schamus:

What about the visual side in terms of a visual education? What were your first memories of things that really, where you thought, where you noticed the frame or where you noticed the image and it really affected you?

Ang Lee:

Oh, you never asked me that before.

James Schamus:

I know, I'm trying to come up with new stuff here.

Ang Lee:

Some movies, early on, I don't know why I remember *Ghost Story*, Japanese *Ghost Story*. It's a trailer, and I won't dare to go by myself to the bathroom at night until I was like 13 or something. So that's one of the earliest I can remember. Actually the earliest image I remember, actually I put that in one scene. I probably never told you that, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, when you show Landy move by, under the moonlight, they talk about the girl. That's kind of the first image in my life. I was sick.

James Schamus:

Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi.

Ang Lee:

Yeah, I was sick. I had a very high temperature and my mother brought me to my father. I must be a baby, one or two years old, one and a half? I remember under a certain light and she asked my father, what am I going to do? She's freaking out. And I just remember that scene and I put it in the same moonlight, same kind of courtyard. Since you asked me, I don't know why.

James Schamus:

You have a memory from when you were a year and a half.

Ang Lee:

They say I was that sick when I was year and a half. I don't know why.

James Schamus:

Oh wow.

Ang Lee:

I've grown up with movies. I think I was never really a writer. In my earlier years I had to write because nobody gave me a script. I had to write. That's why I started with family drama, that's all I know. And then after two movies people would give me a script. I'm happy to snatch their ideas, including yours. And the first I remember I was actually a theatrical type of filmmaker. I was shooting actors. That's pretty much what I did for the first movie. And I try to get away from that a little bit. You know, making low-budget films in New York with you guys, you have to shoot very quickly. You're lucky if you can finish shooting the film. There are few shots, you insist on having them fancy, good looking, but basically shoot actors, which it fits my background really well. I had five years of theatrical training before I decided to be a filmmaker. Then I got a little tired of that.

Ang Lee:

I did *Eat Drink Man Woman*. I got more time, I was making that movie in Taiwan, to think about visually how I want to make it more interesting. Still, they are about actors talking, shooting faces, and I really got into what you're talking about, the framing consciously. I was conscious about myself being a Chinese filmmaker, I use negative space and framing, how the picture reflect the inner pictures of actors without saying it, was starting from actually ironically, *Sense and Sensibility*. Which was the first time I wasn't directing a Chinese film and it's the first time I dealt with a movie purely that was oratory skills. It's a verbal culture. I did that because I was so scared of the actors. I wanted to stay away from them.

Ang Lee:

Remember how you associate with them? Cause I couldn't talk, I was too shy.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

You say I'm a Zen master, I don't say a thing, but I'm everywhere. You're kind of my entourage. You had to kind of deal with them for me.

James Schamus:

Yeah, but it was a complete schtick. I mean, it enabled you to terrorize them.

Ang Lee:

Then I thought about it, well I'm Chinese and I got to do the same sense with through framing, where to put them.

James Schamus:

Well—

Ang Lee:

So that's when I was consciously aware of ...

James Schamus:

Yeah, but it—

Ang Lee:

I was doing.

James Schamus:

I think there's a lot of things feeding into that. I'll never forget the difference between *Eat Drink Man Woman* and then *Sense and Sensibility*, which followed, and the relationship with the actors. I remember going to Taipei after the first day of shooting on *Eat Drink Man Woman*, and at lunch you lined up, you get a Styrofoam container with lunch, and we sat down at the picnic table outside the house. This is where the father is the chef, his house. And we were sitting there chatting and we realized that everybody else, nobody else was sitting at this long picnic table with us. Do you remember this? And you kind of, because he'd been living in New York. He made two films with us in New York. This is your first film in China with Chinese actors and crew. And finally, you just kind of looked around and then you put your head in your hands. He goes, Oh, I forgot to invite the crew to sit with me. And I mean, if I recall, you are always referred to on set as Mr. Director.

Ang Lee:

Yeah, nobody call my name.

James Schamus:

Yeah. Then he goes to England where the actors were all trained at the Royal Academy and they offer every line. They have basically a master's thesis to talk to you about, in shyness like do this, cool, thanks. So you were a little intimidated yourself. So I think you used the no-speaking-English thing—

Ang Lee:

[crosstalk] movie, in a nonverbal way.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

I think as a filmmaker, all filmmakers, and talented filmmakers, it's very important to tell a story visually. That's just the thing.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

Otherwise you'd be doing theater or be a writer or something. If you're a filmmaker, I remember in film school first year they eliminated half of the students, and you can tell whether a person is a filmmaker or not from his very first short film. There were exercises, silent little black-and-white exercise, can someone tell a story with pictures? I think that's, we're born with that. I'm just more aware of them, more willing to shy away from actors and have them do less and the picture do more, and eventually have the audience do more work.

Ang Lee:

I think that's a good way to inviting it. And I naturally fall into that because I think being a Chinese filmmaker, that's my backbone. Not only because I shy from the words. But I think I grew up visually with, dealing with negative space, well deal with more on the space than mass. I think that just my culture and indirectness is pretty much in my blood because we're repressed, we're not supposed to say what we want to say. So we always find ways, metaphors, however picture-wise to hide a story. I think I came with that. So that situation, it's kind of a wakeup call for me as a Chinese filmmaker.

James Schamus:

But you were trained.

Ang Lee:

It's funny. Yeah. I mean—

James Schamus:

You were trained as an actor, right?

Ang Lee:

That was my first English film, but it makes me aware of that's where I come from and that's where I'm going to. And then the movie, it was doing well, it was successful. Then I was more daring to go into that rule as a filmmaker, as a cinema person since the *Ice Storm*.

James Schamus:

No, it's true. I remember on the set of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Ang Lee:

I was more confident to tell.

James Schamus:

No, you turned to me one day and said, "Oh, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, I was the emperor, now I'm just the president."

James Schamus:

So you fled to the visual at that point. But some of your cues for the visual language—

Ang Lee:

I think a lot of the filmmakers, they're pretty awkward talkers.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

I witnessed a lot.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

Yeah. They had to. There's the only way they connect to people and they're best at that. I'm probably one of those. And of course over the years I do publicity as I get better in talking.

James Schamus:

He's doing all right.

Ang Lee:

Ten years ago I wouldn't be poised.

James Schamus:

That's true. But you were trained as an actor.

Ang Lee:

Yeah, I wanted it to be an actor in Taiwan. That's three years of education. It was onstage, be a leading man. No. Then they came to the states.

James Schamus:

Good times.

Ang Lee:

For the study and I was in Champagne, Illinois, and I didn't really speak English, so can't get into the actor's program. I was in one mime show, and then I was doing the lighting and all that stuff. Stage work, put on the stage and stuff, and I had to be a director. I got depressed and the young mind works. I didn't want to be a theater director. I think the

best people go onstage and be actors. It's actor and audience. Nobody cared about stage director; they're failed actors. That's how my mind works. And I thought if I want to be a director, I want to be a movie director. I didn't want to be a stage director. So I applied to film school. But for a long time I thought I was a stage person. That's why I feel very close with actors.

James Schamus:

Going back to your first couple of films. You'd been writing screenplays, you got out of NYU, and spent how many years before you made your first feature?

Ang Lee:

Six years.

James Schamus:

Six years. Wow.

Ang Lee:

I was writing script and cooking, and taking care of baby. I was afraid if I go take a job and then I would miss some chance or something. So I didn't really have a job.

James Schamus:

That's as good an excuse for unemployment as I can come up with. I can't have a job because I'm waiting for the phone to ring to get me a job.

Ang Lee:

Yeah. Until I entered this Taiwanese government script competition. I wrote a script that I've never, I had that idea, *Pushing Hands*, and I didn't want to make it. So that's why I wrote it, I saw the government might like it and I got first place and they want to make the movie. I said I have to think about it for a couple of days and life goes nowhere. You know, it's been six, seven years, I haven't made a movie since the student days. So I took the job. That was *Pushing Hands*. Some of you might have seen it here. That's how I met James. I got a little bit of money, Taiwanese government money. I don't know if I can make a movie out of that money then, some people introduced me and James and his partner, Ted Hope of Good Machine, and we made the movie. And then after that we get the chance to make *The Wedding Banquet*, which it's an international art-house hit. That's how we started.

James Schamus:

So you now have the opportunity to ask some questions.

Ang Lee:

Up right there.

Speaker 5:

What do you dream about? I mean, are there things that come from your dreams that recur, that go into the way that you visualize?

Ang Lee:

Dreaming about making movies. Oh, this movie I've made as kind of my dreams. You know, in some ways I feel I was just loosely connected to this world. I'm a very spaced-out person, but I could really focus in making the movie. So I'm kind of creating home for myself and I feel I'm more grounded in behind the screen than to the world I'm dealing with. So I guess in a way it's dream, but the dream is so vivid to me that they become my ultimate reality and emotionally and thoughtfully, there seems to be more strong for me and they make sense to me.

Ang Lee:

The real world doesn't really make sense. Just too big for me to understand. There's so much complexions to comprehend. But a movie world, they're like a dream. But you know, it's not like your dreams, the irrational, it's your rationalities, but it feels like a dream. So all those movies. The only one movie that gave me the nightmare was *The Hulk*.

James Schamus:

You're not alone.

Ang Lee:

The only movie. There's some images, they come back and haunt me and give me nightmares. The fight with his father, the last section, pretty good fight with the rock, I don't know why the rock. And a couple of times when they're under the water. I was terrified. It never happened to me. It was usually when I did those pictures and I was very much at ease and sleep very well. Better than in between movies.

Ang Lee:

But those got back to me. I think maybe they're too violent. Maybe they get into my psyche, to my childhood terror, I don't know what. They did get to me as nightmares, but other than that I'm, I love those movies I made. I cannot look at them as storytelling. It's just flashbacks of images in my head. And then my job is to put them together so it's comprehensible. But what motivated me to do those movies, sometimes they're images, like one little thing and I decide to take the whole part project. For *Crouching Tiger*, it was a thick, pulpy fiction. It's the last paragraph when she flies down, there's one image that hit me and I wanted to make the movie. With *The Ice Storm* it was the image when the kid played by Elijah Wood, when he get electrocuted. Right before that is a shot in my head, he sliced down the road in a transparent, clean world.

Ang Lee:

I remember exactly that was page 200. Exactly 200. I said that's the movie I want to make. So there are some images that had me want to make the movies. With *Brokeback*, there's no specific. It's just when he take out the shirts, I was moved. I wanted to make the movie. But it could be from anywhere, and they're somewhat all my dreams, they're parts of the movie, that's my job because I can string the dreams together and there are shots just something I want to do. And usually the shots and the idea and certain tastes, they come to me first, like a fighting scene for Jackie Chan. Then he think about how to pull it together in a story. I've got a fight here, I got to do this that I do, and then he finds a way to string them together and make sense. So it's a similar thing to me because a lot of them, they're that dream to me. Flying is one of them. Yeah. And green. Something green in a bamboo. It happened in my dreams.

James Schamus:

All right. Question, there.

Speaker 6:

Nowadays when you make movies, I imagine it's very easy to get a lot of people to come around and want to help you very much, but back when you were making *Pushing Hands*, I imagine the process was very difficult and maybe even scary. Can you talk about how you willed *Pushing Hands* into existence and how you steeled yourself to make that movie?

Ang Lee:

I cannot explain, I always work hard, but when things, it's like destiny. When things meant to happen they just come, and before that, no matter how hard I pushed them, it just won't happen. Two years before pushing, I was involved in a, for example, a script called *Neon* and I got Dylan McDermott, it was supposed to be a very low-budget film. And Julia Roberts, before *Pretty Woman*, and Vince D'Onofrio. And like two months before it's happened, the deal fall apart. That's maybe my stories. So I didn't really know. I happen to be the worst pitcher and James can tell you about that.

Ang Lee:

It's very hard for me to verbalize my idea in a very short terms. Not only in English, but Chinese too. Usually when I'm interested in something because I could not make decisions, and because I'm confused about the material that really interests me and I need to do something about it. And film is one way I deal with that. So it's been very difficult for me. *Pushing Hands* fall on my lap because I won the script competition and they have to push me to make the movie. So that's the irony. And up to this day, I don't really know how to push, to turn things around verbally or just have somebody to trust me before I do it. Now I don't have to do that and thanks God, I don't have to pitch a movie.

Ang Lee:

But back then I had a pretty convincing student film. My student film at NYU, which is a very good film school, I won the best film, best director of that year, so I got an agent, and he will send to wherever it needs to be sent. I think anybody's seeing that short film, which is 43 minutes long, would have doubts that I can make movies, but it's just the way I talk about script, it gets stuck and also I think the script doesn't really work.

Ang Lee:

That's before I met James. I don't think I know too much about script writing yet, in a vigilant scale. I think a short feature film is not just a longer short films, it's a different ballgame. It's a structure. It's character development. I didn't realize that until many years after film school. So it took me a long time to understand about writing and through which about feature filmmaking. So I struggle that a lot. I think convincing work, like student film I had, and particularly a good script, is what it takes. I don't know how much pushing and deal making and presentation, pitching will help somebody throw the money at you when you're new.

James Schamus:

Yeah, well that's true. You came in to describe *Pushing Hands* and you really felt like you had to pitch, and pitches, there's a genre to it. It's supposed to last about between five and 15 minutes. And if you're from the new Hollywood

school, you're supposed to stand up during the pitch, which to me it's like the most, it's the scariest moment in the world when the crazed screenwriters starts to stand up in front of you and act it out. But apparently they like that in LA. And I'll forget, you sat down and you talked about the movie for about, it was about an hour, 45 minutes to an hour, and we were, I mean there was an element of like ...

James Schamus:

Because we're just not used to that pace. But I'll never forget when you walked out of the office, I turned to Ted, I said, "Well yeah, that was pretty much the worst pitch I've ever heard in my life." But, you talked about the movie as a filmmaker. You described a movie that you had already, in many ways, you had already made the movie in your head a few times.

Ang Lee:

Kind of, yeah.

James Schamus:

Then that was the thing that was the key to us, was listening to that where you were really talking to somebody who wasn't pitching a story, but somebody was actually describing a movie. And describing a movie can be fairly tedious as you know, that people, like you asked about dreams and there are certain people, I know that it's the last question you ever want to ask them at breakfast. What happened in your dream last night? It's like, and then the big lizard came out, but it was you!

James Schamus:

But somehow you made it work. So that was good. Question, let's go over to the other side, there.

Ang Lee:

There's somebody there.

Speaker 7:

Hi. I just wanted to say, I always enjoy the scenes of food and eating all the time in your movies. And I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about what food means to you in your film.

Ang Lee:

You want the theory or what really happened?

Speaker 7:

What really happened.

Ang Lee:

I spent six years cooking at home, my wife goes to work. And sometimes there's, someday I'm going to experience, make a movie to make people's mouth water. No, I've been cooking that since I was cooking at home. And the theory is that I think food and sex, or human desires, basic desires, we see so much sex, but we haven't seen enough food there with it.

Ang Lee:

It's a gold mine, why don't people use that? And also the Chinese culture is just tight with food. People talk about that a lot. And everything Chinese do—kung fu, food, and tea—whatever they relate to their life philosophy, which is very Taoist. So they keep balance and medicine too, so you can fit a lot of Chinese culture into it. So, I think it's a gold mine for me. So many opportunity, again, it fit into the dining table and cooking. And it's so intuitive.

James Schamus:

It's also a way to torture your crew and your producers because the hardest thing on earth is food continuity in shooting these scenes. You have the wide shot, the close-ups. You do the fifth take. Everybody's chewing. Some people are chewing and spitting, and some people are chewing and eating. Some people know how to fake chew, some people don't. And then it's like how much lobster is on the plate? And that's like, everybody who's on IMDb, catching all the continuity problems. It's almost always how high was the bouncing Coke glass. Every time we go back, reverse shot, it's boing, boing, boing, boing.

Ang Lee:

And their end result is almost torture for audience. You know, I saved a lot of Chinese restaurants business after *Eat Drink Man Woman*, if they're close to the theater. In making that movie, I wanted to make sure nobody eats, they talk, they prepare it and get your appetites all aroused, and nobody eats them. They stay thin. So that's a torture.

Speaker 8:

Yes, I saw the *Brokeback Mountain* and I thought indeed, it was a very beautiful movie. Very moving and very sad too. And first and foremost, a love story. I also read that it was an adaptation from a short story by Annie Proulx. And my question is that, was she on the set with you? And did she work with you for the script? And eventually, what was her reaction to, about the movie?

James Schamus:

No, no, and?

Ang Lee:

And yes. Well she was very educational in the beginning of my preparation. I talked to her once in New York and then I visited Wyoming, and she personally took me around in where she think her ideal Brokeback Mountain is. Also, we hit the bars, the towns, crossroads, she showed me pictures. So that was very helpful, and after that, I pretty much seen her at the premiere. She was very hands-off. I think that team, the short story to a script, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana did a great job. I'm sure they have arguments and work in progress, struggling, but that, that happened long before I lay my hands on the material. So I work with Larry, which is an even bigger figure than Annie Proulx herself, and Diana. About three rounds of script changings and I also learned a lot from Larry on the West and, but then I think people understand when you make a movie it's something else.

Ang Lee:

The whole time, I couldn't tell her. All I tried to do is do justice to her writing because it's such a brilliant piece of literature. But I have different media. Movies photorealistic, they don't have a internal writing. In order to do what she did to her reader, which is me. I want to do the same thing to the audience. That was my goal. But in order to do the

same thing you have to make changes. I think at some point she had some notes, pretty strict notes about: they should be eating hamburgers instead of chicken steak, there's no Wyoming, Welcome to Wyoming should be Entering Wyoming, that sort of rigorous notes about details. And after that she was pretty much, good luck. And then finally, so it's being, psychologic is a big burden on me for a long time, that whether she would approve what I did or not because there are things I took liberties, and then she loved the movie unconditionally.

Ang Lee:

It was one of the most beautiful thing in my life. I have no such fear for my previous film and obligation to be loyal to the original material because either they're dead, like Jane Austen... They're not going to come out of the grave and point at me.

James Schamus:

Some people would disagree with you on that.

Ang Lee:

Or like Rick Moody, or there's a couple of other, they're young writers, I didn't really care where they think. It was their first time, working--

James Schamus:

Good to know now.

Ang Lee:

Very much of life. It's really intimidating and there are two of them. Very scary. It just psychologically, it gets to me. So finally when she loved it, and want to see it again and again. Seems like everything, including the changes. She even made comments like, no people should do more adaptation from short story because they have room to expand. So that was—

James Schamus:

She took the blue pill, and suddenly goes, it's been great.

Ang Lee:

I have a friend that knows, she wrote to us a thank-you note after she's seen the movie, I had framed. That is so precious to me, it means so much to me.

James Schamus:

And it was very well written. We have a gentleman down here.

Speaker 9:

The world is awash in images and also in words, and Harold Pinter in his recent Nobel Prize acceptance speech talked about the difficulty of the artist to construct truth through words. I'm interested in you talking about the responsibility of the filmmaker to construct a kind of truth through images. The short version of my question is, is there a responsibility for the filmmaker, particularly the commercial, mainstream filmmaker, to be political in some way?

Ang Lee:

Personally I— I'll let you answer that second part.

James Schamus:

It's a job; someone's got to do it.

Ang Lee:

But personally, I think we all do raise the big question but not providing answers. I think the answer would, anything that answerable or talkable from my Chinese philosophy is not the real answer. It's bias. I think it's a simply vacation. I think that's not what I like to do, what I like to do is mix and match and see what happened. I think movie ought to be provocation. I say, make a statement and you'll listen or debate with me. That's not what it's about. I think it's a provocation. See what that kind of thought, the emotion that provoked and the audience should go ahead and work on the film, work on themselves and find the answers. Of course, they won't, but they've been stimulated there. They're alive, they ask questions. Life is too complicated to give answer or give a statement. That's why we need art and entertainment. I think we fill that gap. No, I'm not a prisoner of the United States. I don't have to give you an answer or statement, and I raised the questions. That's my attitude.

James Schamus:

Questions.

Speaker 10:

Well loneliness and intimacy sure seems difficult to put on the screen to me. What kind of challenges did you face doing that? Were there any interesting stories about trying to do that?

Ang Lee:

Loneliness, and I think this goes back to how I frame them, I think they can use some help. The loneliness has a lot to do with macho-ness and also the landscape. And I think the landscape is important that you use that to reflect how they feel. I think the landscape because western is in the wilderness, it has taken that tradition. It has. You have to frame it so it's grand. On the other hand, it is a private milieu. That's where they make love. It's a hideout; it's a secretive place so it's both secret and open. So, you have to show it visually that it has that kind of possibility. And also in movie I mixed two genres. One is the macho western overlap with western and the culture, to sell realistically speaking was tough and conservative, but on the other hand as a gay love story. Usually they don't mix on-screen, so I was, I feel like in the frontier and groping my way, walking a tightrope to see how I balanced the two.

Ang Lee:

The other thing that really puzzled me is as I was reading it, including the script, it looks like a short epic story that also clashed too. I was reading only for 30 pages long and it's tough, but she has internal writings which I couldn't do it, and it's a story cover 20 years long. So at the end you want to feel epic and that also has to do with landscape and the scale of, the number of scenes that you accumulate. But the scene itself is a slice of life. So all those things, they sort of clash each other, which I like. I like the challenge. So at dealing with that, in addition to loneliness and intimacy.

Ang Lee:

I think loneliness is easy. I think it's easier to show loneliness.

James Schamus:

Just have guys sitting around looking at each other.

Ang Lee:

Small, with yeah. And space, visual space and time space. If they stretch out their lines, in between two lines, they stretch out, you feel loneliness. You're pulling the wind. Loneliness to me, is easy. But intimacy, and it's refused, I think that's the hard part. For the love story, how much are you willing to fall with falling in love? It's a fall. It's destructive. How much are you willing to kill yourself to put everything aside and to deal with your psychology to be intimate? I think that's a better, that's a bigger issue. That's transcend a gay love story, I think that's. They have a chance to be together but Ennis wouldn't do it. All they got is *Brokeback Mountain*, as Jack says. So that's the, I think that's when he's dealing with intimacy. I think you have to make that work.

James Schamus:

I think there's something else. You know, intimacy is such a funny, interesting term. It started to appear more in the culture, and one of the things that I think your films come back to again and again is that part and parcel, the creation of even the internal space to have even an intimate relationship with yourself is that sense of, you know, guilt and shame. Something inside you that creates risk.

Ang Lee:

You cannot even be honest with yourself, let alone other people. So those are big issues.

James Schamus:

I mean it's one of those things, we've all known people who are so therapeutized and who are so completely have their whole analytic schtick down that they are like, vending machines of feelings. You know what I mean? There's no one in there? And I think there's that sense of kind of, in your movies, as you said, because the repression is so necessary, because it creates that kind of force that almost opens up the internal space.

James Schamus:

And hence you have, in a weird way, you have, even though you're coming out of a different tradition that has no kind of Christian theological thing. You do that with some of this stuff, we took for example, *Brokeback* out of Annie's story, but the finding of the sheep and the morning after. And it's not guilt like, Oh God, we have sinned by having gay-homo sex, it's more of that, wow, I'm falling in love, this is this incredible access to my interiority, to who I am. And it's a completely frightening thing that has this kind of shock of it.

Ang Lee:

It's more clear in the movie than the short story to me, because short story is a mystery, you have to work very hard to get in there, and it has internal writing. For me, in dealing with intimacy of two characters, they're to me, like the both side of American I understand. One is the tough, conservative, self-denial part that Heath Ledger play. The other is more the American that we know of, or we like to think American is, that's romantic, more knowingly, more

free spirit, smart and articulate. That's Jake Gyllenhaal play. He is really the romantic lead and I think they make a very good couple. They counterpoint each other.

James Schamus:

And plus one's blond and one's brunette. I'm just speaking as a producer.

Ang Lee:

I think the actors bring a lot of, their performance really make the movie. I can only do so much visually. I mean, after all, you're watching human faces. That's what you identify with for two hours and nobody can watch beautiful picture more than like five minutes. Or—

James Schamus:

Unless there's a lot of shapes starting to extend in the tent.

Ang Lee:

Or scheme or structure. But I think the actors bring a lot of life to it too. Both intimacy and loneliness.

Speaker 11:

There are a lot of filmmakers that would probably not have taken the risk of *Brokeback*. You in fact have made now two films about a gay, the gay theme or a gay experience. What is it, do you think in your background that leads you to make film about the gay experience and why do you think you're so extremely successful at capturing that gay experience?

Ang Lee:

I wish I know so I'll do a third one and be successful. Well, I would have to guess like, being an outsider all my life. I can very easy to identify with somebody and not in the, in the majority of group, and still you have to live with them. You have to function and you have to be part of society. I think those characters really was like me, all my life. My parents came from China to Taiwan because of civil war. Their family were destroyed by the communist and in Taiwan we're not native. We think we're pure Chinese, but nobody think we were. So we're being called outsiders. The elder, provincial people, we're like the new seller, but it also ramped the country. That's the tricky part. And dominated culture for a long time. And then I came to the States and become a foreigner.

Ang Lee:

Then I go back to China, I'm American Taiwanese. So that was never really deeply rooted in any culture except the Chinese, the dreamy Chinese in my head. And also the movie I make, I make them at home. Personally, I live in New York. That's when I see my wife and kids, I feel I'm home. But that's family, that's not a cultural home. And also, I was prohibited to read communist books in Taiwan. It was most anticommunist place on earth. And I grow up that way, and I came to the States, I started read communist books. I was 23, and after 23 years I realized we are the bad guys. So that was a big shock for me. The whole world turned upside down on me. I think it's very easy for me to look at the world from a lower angle, I suppose. Not only with the gay thing. I mean, *Ride with the Devil*, we have one German descendant, that Tobey Maguire play, and a black guy who's fighting for the courts of the South, and Jeffrey Wright. I can really identify with those people. So I guess that's probably the only reason. And also I think I'm a male, that humble feeling-

James Schamus:

Some of us have had that suspicion for a long time.

Ang Lee:

Well, being gay, it's a big part of us. We didn't really honest look at it, for straight guys. I think this is something there worth digging into, that when you confront with your own fear and doubts and there's something new that you understand by life and yourself. I think those are very valuable for me. And when I make a gay-related movie, I'm not comfortable both in the straight world and the gay world. So I'm like in that position again. But somehow they have a universal appeal. Not a calculated, like a marketing person. That's just the way I know how to make movies, how to survive from the filmmaking. Somehow I think they showed. I can only tell you that much, you know.

James Schamus:

And you're good at research. We have a production executive that's gay. And while, we were pre-production on the movie, and he said, you know, I really need just some really specific information here, and I'm just not, like, you know, where do I get it?

James Schamus:

So we asked him to do a little tutorial, and two hours later he opened the door to his office. I said, "So how did it go?" He goes, "That was the most embarrassing two hours of my life." So I don't know what you asked, whatever it was.

James Schamus:

We had a hand up there?

Ang Lee:

I like their viewing position. I like to see the straight world is crazy and they're normal. They're normal. I just like that point of view and yeah, I can very much identify with that. Go ahead. Sorry.

Speaker 12:

You talked about the Taiwanese trilogy and then moving to *Sense and Sensibility*, and I've always been really fascinated by that for a couple of different reasons. First of all, you worked very heavily in your own culture, and then you went, not only to a completely different culture, but you went two different, like two, three centuries later and you also were dealing with classical literature, and I'm always fascinated by an outsider's perspective on another culture and another time and place. And it's a very special movie to me and I cannot tell you why. It just really resonated with me from the very first time I've seen it. And what was your experience, dealing with going from Taiwanese films, going to old England?

Ang Lee:

Put the fear factors aside. I think, I didn't understand, I would just try to survive. When I read the script first, when they sent to me, I thought they were crazy. All the ethics and bows, introductions, that's the first half. And then second half, they started making sense to me. They saw *Wedding Banquet*, and thinks somehow I should be the one to do Jane Austen. But I feel very at home. I felt like I knew the thing very well at heart and I felt, and I realize all my first three movie, the "Father" trilogy, is really about sense and sensibilities, a social obligation fight with your

personal freewill. Except I couldn't pinpoint that well and put it that well, like Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility*. So I really would soak into that, and also the chance of working with Emma Thompson. I put fear aside and I jump into it.

Ang Lee:

It's a risk for me and for the producers. Everybody's at risk cause nobody's seen an Asian director do that, and I don't know what's going to be. Somehow I survive, I know it's doable. It strikes me as movies really sign and sound, it can be universal. But you have to be diligently, I have to diligently learn about the textures. I spent six months before production, just prepare and accumulate my knowledge about handling the literature part and also making movie there from details to whatever. It's a long process. I didn't make those movies overnight by myself. So that was all I know, when I make the movies. And over the years I did it quite a few times and I realized something as an outsider, there's a benefit to it because the first thing you see is the overall shape.

Ang Lee:

Because you have a distance. It's clarity, reality, and your story is from reality. I think you want to be authentic, if you have the will to do that you will get there, and actually quicker because you're less entangled with the texture. And then you'll see subtext, you see through it much quicker. I got that notion from making *The Ice Storm*, I found was quicker than anybody on set who lived through those years and find what the movie's about.

James Schamus:

Well that's if everybody else, everybody on the crew was trying to figure out whether that was the bong they had in high school.

Ang Lee:

So you're less tangled with the reality of the textures. But that is my weakness when I do English-language film or something. I remember being an outsider. But that can be, it can be a man that, you know, the image keep added, keep checking, and you make it into the film world that's believable, that's functional, which is harder than get it authentic.

Ang Lee:

But I've found personally, the hardest thing is when a movie come out, it will be different than how people made it before. And what the public's going to say, critics going to say, they call me outside in the first two movies. But I think I was more right and more authentic than how the American movie did. But that's culture. So the cultural convention is, it's more difficult for me to deal with than historical convention.

James Schamus:

But it's also true, I think on *Sense and Sensibility*, the thing that struck me so clearly as we were making that transition for you, was you take early 19th-century Britain, was a landed patriarchy and that is being blown up, just in the time that Jane Austen is writing, into the first major capitalist empire. And you look at what's happened during your childhood and what you were tracking in the first three movies with the end of a Confucian patriarchy that often derived from nationalist landed orient that lands in Taiwan, and they have to transform themselves into übercapitalists where everything's, all of a sudden the patriarchy is over to the side and suddenly it's what's for sale and how are we going to make it work. And so you're seeing very similar societies being transformed, almost in very

similarly explosive ways. And so the transition from late 20th-century Taiwan to early 19th-century Britain was much easier than it would be from late 20th-century Britain to early 19th-century Britain where there's really foreign--

Ang Lee:

On one foot, I was raised one foot still in that old society, I think.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

But pure English texture, there's no way, I just have to study and get to know them, even get to be good at it, like dry sense of humor.

James Schamus:

Yeah, but we hire this--

Ang Lee:

This double negative and all that stuff, you just have to learn and pretend you have that sense of humor. And I actually picked up some.

James Schamus:

Yeah.

Ang Lee:

I use it afterwards. I feel I was smarter than all of them, but I did pick that up.

Speaker 13:

I have a question. I get the feeling you know each other very well and I'm wondering, does one of you see a script and tell the other, oh, you know, like James, you tell Ang, This would be perfect for you, because I get the sense that you have a hunch of what Ang would like and vice versa.

James Schamus:

Well Ang is—

Ang Lee:

There's no vice versa, it's a one-way street. Everything goes here.

James Schamus:

Well no, *Crouching Tiger*--

Ang Lee:

I don't really know him. He's, you know? His whole being is about knowing me, I guess. It's hard for me to work with other writers. It seems like they don't understand, and clearly I say this, how come they write something else? But he

will understand for some reason. When we first met, him and Ted, they shared two tables with another company, and James look, Ted looks like a key PA to me. James looked like a PR professor and a used-car salesman, I would say.

Ang Lee:

I don't know if I want to give my money to them, and I don't know if they are crooks or not, but they sound, they say something really moved me. They said we're king of no-budget filmmaking. Listen, it's not low budget, it's no budget, and your money is luxury for us. Our job is, our interest is to teach directors to make the movie they can afford, instead of spend time in development hell. Which I spent six years in that, and that was moving to me, and then I think James said, "We're with director-centered producers. Our job is to make the directors work," and I believed them and they didn't let me down. From small movie like that to big *Hulk*, to now he's on the other side of the table and green-lit, *Brokeback Mountain*. They are still helping me make the movie I can afford.

Ang Lee:

In terms of development, usually it comes this way. Even with *The Ice Storm*, it wasn't his idea to make movie. He didn't introduce Rick Moody's book to me, he said, "This is very interesting young writer in America, take a look, it's fun to read."

James Schamus:

And that's a perfect example. I was like, this is a really good book. It's too scary to even think about making it a movie, but you should read it anyhow. Of course, he read it and he called like, let's make the movie. And I was like, fuck. That's kind of the--

Ang Lee:

And also we would collaborate on scripts. The first movie, it didn't work much.

James Schamus:

Yeah, a couple lines.

Ang Lee:

And the second, and it didn't sell really outside of Taiwan. And he said, "Let me help you with a second script." He expand Simon's part and whatever they, really significant chance the first quarter and last quarter. And that was a success. So we kept collaborating script. Either he call me in to do a rewrite or do an original like *Ride with the Devil*, *The Ice Storm*, *The Hulk*. Sometimes he'll, well he ended up also selling those movies. So it's always you—

James Schamus:

Screenwriting is another form of salesmanship, in a sense. I mean, you write a poem. When you're finished writing a poem, you have a poem. When you write a screenplay, you're finished, you have 120 pages, like, to go begging people to do stuff and give you money. So to me, I always think of the writing as a very instrumental process, not as a means, an end in itself. It's really a means to something else. Writing for Ang is a very specific process. It really is. I mean, I love doing Hollywood hack, rewrite work because it's, I enjoy it completely.

James Schamus:

It pays and it's craft. You know what I mean? It's like engineering. You really have to go in there and fix stuff and make it all work and you have to be very rigorous. Hollywood scripts have to be very, very tight. And the reason they have to be so rigorous, the reason they have to be so tight is, of course, you're writing for studio executives whose greatest fear in the world is the director. And all they need, all they want is a screenplay that even the worst director in Hollywood can't screw up. That's the job. So it's got to be totally airtight. Whereas writing for Ang, I've got to write something that's really scary and that gets his interest. So it has to have a lot of gaps and fissures and problems. It has to have places that are a little weird.

Ang Lee:
Underwritten.

James Schamus:
Yeah, I underwrite a lot. I don't, I try not to write—

Ang Lee:
A lot of scripts out there I've read, they don't interest me even though they're well-crafted, but they're built like battleship, like so solid.

Ang Lee:
Yeah. It's a little bit, feel like battleship to me. Anybody can do it and feel that way. Yeah. But sometimes I feel I owe James because I don't really treat him like writer, I treat him like producers. Once I was accepting a script award in Cannes for *The Ice Storm*, and onstage it hit me. He's a writer, I was accepting for him. Sometimes he'll tell me, we have to cut that scene, it's too expensive. So what kind of writer are you? Do I have to protect your own words? So I never really give him credit as a writer.

James Schamus:
Thank you very much for joining us tonight.

Ang Lee:
Thank you.