Cultural Daily

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In Working with Ang Lee, Seizing the Moments

Ted Hope · Thursday, August 14th, 2014

Ted Hope has produced more than 70 films, and his work has largely defined American independent cinema. This is an excerpt from his new book, *Hope for Film: From the Frontline of the Independent Cinema Revolutions*, available now on Amazon.

“Let me take a minute to think about it.”

The phrase seems innocuous enough. But for Ang Lee, perhaps the most commercially successful and critically regarded director whom we ever worked with at Good Machine, the comment was far more than a simple request to ponder.

Ang really took a minute to think about things—often far longer. You’d say something to him, and he’d nod and take it in, and you’d move on, maybe have lunch, and then go on to something else. And then he’d finally answer the question that you asked him hours before—often without acknowledging that time had passed or that other events had intervened. Ang would just start back in, expecting you to be right there with him. We learned to give him this time, as he frequently had some critical, important, and sometimes brilliant points to add.

Many times on the sets of his early films, *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*, the assistant director or another crew member would come up to me concerned and saying, “Ang is going into that zone again.” I would then look out on to the set, and there Ang would be, with either a scowl or a thoughtful look on his face, almost still, taking a moment to think about it—and many of his collaborators just standing there staring at him.

It’s very easy to fall into assumptions when you’re making a film and to think that all filmmakers do things in a standard and specific way. This one-size-fits-all mentality corrupts productions, but Ang helped me recognize that every director—just like the crew and cast—is unique. The director has his or her own pace, style, and sensibility, and it’s the producers’ job (all the collaborators, really) to understand their director’s unique way of working and protect it. We can’t apply a template, but instead have to custom-fit each production around the vision at the center. For Ang, some of his distinctive qualities might well be cultural. He was born in Taiwan and only moved to the United States to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the late 1970s and then NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts for graduate film school. But it was more than just his upbringing; you must pay attention to what is truly unique about everyone as an individual.

When I was an undergrad at NYU, I was fortunate to see Ang’s thesis film *Fine Line*, and I thought it was one of the best shorts to come out of NYU. Starring Chazz Palminteri in his first role, it was

a very kinetic and visceral film, shot handheld, about a Caucasian guy from Little Italy who falls in love with a girl from Chinatown. Even back then, Ang clearly knew how to use the camera to capture emotion, but I didn't know anything else about him. Because Ang Lee went to NYU (like Martin Scorsese) and the film was set in Little Italy, I just assumed Ang was Italian. I even convinced myself that his name must be a pseudonym—another Italian American using a name like "Angle-E"? It was the age of graffiti and tags, and what can I say, I like wild guesses.

Early in my producing career, I drew up a list of directors whom I wanted to work with. The list included Ang Lee, Nicole Holofcener, Kelly Reichardt, Phil Morrison, Jem Cohen, and Mark Friedberg (Friedberg would soon become a successful production designer, working on many of Ang's films). Later, when I actually started pursuing directors, Ang was my first call. And when I pitched the idea of a producer-led, director-driven film company to potential partners, like James Schamus, Ang was always on the list. It was just a matter of finding him—and I hadn't. I had scoured the New York phone book (this was before the Internet), I had called his agent, but he didn't want anything to do with me.

Eventually Ang found me.

So much is serendipity. I would never have met Ang if it weren't for my ignorance in choosing to forgo Sundance in 1990, the year that James had been executive producer for Todd Haynes's *Poison* and I had line produced Hal Hartley's *Trust.* These were the days before accounting software, and someone had to stay behind and do the books. And at the time, nobody knew Sundance was a big deal. So I had thought, "Why would I ever want to go to a film festival? Particularly one all the way out in Utah? I'm a producer."

I was sitting in a tiny little office, above a strip joint called the Babydoll Lounge in what was then a semirough section of Tribeca (yes, there once were semirough sections of Tribeca), trying to do the accounting for our first year in business, when a humble-looking Asian man wearing a windbreaker and holding a plastic bag walked in and said, "Excuse me." I didn't know who he was or why he was there. And then he said, "I'm Ang Lee. And if I don't make a film soon, I'm going to die."

He dropped the plastic bag down on my desk. Inside the bag were two scripts, *Pushing Hands* and T*he Wedding Banquet*. He had entered both screenplays in a script contest in Taiwan and had won some prize money. A mutual friend, David Lasserson, had told him that I was the only guy in New York who could make a movie well for a budget that low.

It was a gift to have money for one movie and the promise of more for the next, but it wasn't enough to get things done "right." It was going to be an exercise in cutting corners and discovering solutions. Ang was eager to move forward. He'd do whatever was necessary to get his movie made, and if this was all the money he was going to get, he was committed to finding a way. Once we began collaborating, it quickly became apparent that even with the right attitude, making a movie with Ang wasn't going to be easy. He had his own idiosyncratic, culturally and individually specific ways of doing things.

We made Ang's first film, *Pushing Hands*, for around $350,000, shooting on 35 mm film in eighteen days. Each day was long and felt longer than the day preceding it. But because of a union dispute with the studios at the time, film people in New York weren't working, so everyone on our crew felt that it was a privilege just to have a job. And because *Pushing Hands* was partly in

Chinese, no one thought the film would ever be a big deal. Back then, American films, particularly indie ones, weren't selling for millions at Sundance and never seemed to make waves overseas. Other than the fact that people had a job, there didn't seem to be an upside for anyone. Everyone was just there to work. But because the budget was extremely tight, it seemed as if our money was disappearing into an abyss with every passing hour. I had to make the production function better and more efficiently.

Decisions weren't getting made, and we were squandering resources. In low-budget production, it rarely seems you get a moment to think about things; you have to act and solve problems every second. Instead of thinking three steps ahead, we were falling behind. In my production-centric view, I believed that if we didn't replace the assistant director and instill careful planning in mornings and evenings, we would never finish the film on time. It took me another couple of days to act—that often-disastrous gulf between thought and action—but sensing greater danger, I finally fired the assistant director and imposed a schedule and an order on the production. Bam. We got serious.

We didn't have the funds to hire a replacement, so I stepped in as assistant director. Things started to change. Ang needed rigid instructions to get the film done, and having an authoritative leader on set actually worked best for him. We needed to review the shot list and shooting schedule at the beginning of every day and go over the next day's plans at the end of the day and regularly throughout the day; we also needed to remind Ang whether we were ahead or behind and what would come next. If we didn't get on him and his director of photography to make decisions and commitments and not deviate from the plan, the production would drift. But when Ang and the director of photography did act decisively, we flew. The crew responded to decisiveness. But then, the crew always responds to decisiveness. (Ironically, I think the rigidity of those first two productions created a desire in Ang to find a way to build greater creative flexibility and spontaneity in his later films.)

I became intimately acquainted with Ang in those days, because, as a result of the film being so financially challenged, I took on the job of not only producer and assistant director, but also Ang's personal driver. While chauffeuring Ang back and forth from the set to his home in White Plains, we planned our shooting days. But after a fifteen-hour day, it's hard for anyone to stay focused on the road, and it's even harder when your director is so tired that he frequently forgets where he lives. I thought I had learned the route to his home, but again and again, we would drive by the house, or make a wrong turn, or take the wrong exit off the highway. Often we'd be a mile or two past the turn, and Ang would all of a sudden say, "Hey, you missed the turn!"—a fitting metaphor for many movie productions.

Eight years after he graduated from NYU, Ang often stayed at home writing, cooking, and taking care of his son. Clearly, Ang was a gifted artist. His short films proved it. But because he wasn't the sort who knew how to sell himself to people with power, he wasn't at a level commensurate with his abilities. For all that time between his first feature and his fourth, *Sense and Sensibility*, none of the other tenants in his apartment building knew that their neighbor was one of the great filmmakers of our era.

When we finally finished *The Ice Storm*, we told Ang he had to move and get an actual house for his family (which he finally did). By then, he had earned a substantial amount of money, after all. You could misinterpret Ang's willingness to stay put as spaciness, but he was just extremely focused on what he was creating.

While looking at Ang, you often feel as if he is “taking a moment to think about it.” It may be several moments he’s taking, but he isn’t taking decisions lightly. Ang has a unique ability to see his entire movie and completely hold it in his mind: how the shots fit together or comment upon each other; how the scenes shape our expectations; how the characters evolve or not. It must be hard to think of something else when your thoughts are filled with the challenges of creating an entire world. And Ang not only seems to be doing it with the movie he’s shooting, but also appears to be thinking how the work will prepare him for the next world he might get to build. It’s not surprising he misses a few turns in the road or stays put a bit longer than others.

It wasn’t just me who learned how to think differently in those days. If one role of a producer is to inspire a filmmaker to realize his or her dream and find the big vision that everyone will get behind, then the next role is to knock this dream back down to reality by helping the director understand what can be accomplished within the limits of what he or she can obtain. The third role of the producer is to help the director recognize how those chains can be a blessing. With those initial films, Ang came to understand how limitations benefit the process. Ang became conscious of the time one has to make a movie and how to use it wisely, and when is the right time to take a moment to think about things—and to protect the necessity of doing things in the way only he knows how.

Want to hear more from Ted Hope? Read ‘What I Learned Producing Ang Lee’s 1st Breakout Hit’ on Ted’s blog.

Top image: A scene from The Ice Storm

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