

FEATURES

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For an accomplished thespian and a leading man of Taiwanese cinema, Leon Dai (戴立忍) comes across as surprisingly sincere and modest. He began our interview in the coffee shop at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家) by apologizing for making me wait while he snuck out for a cigarette break between interviews and photo shoots. There is a soothing calmness in the 43-year-old actor and director's voice, and when responding to questions about his movies he seems to weigh his answers carefully, before delivering well-articulated answers.

Although Dai is known from television soap operas such as *The Hospital* (白色巨塔) and the more than 30 movies he has starred in since the 1990s, few realize that the versatile actor is also a theater and film director, editor and scriptwriter. He assumed multiple roles for his second feature film, *No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti* (不能沒有你), which debuted last Friday. He spent a year-and-a-half writing the story, directed and edited the film, and closely followed each step of the postproduction.

Set in Cijin (旗津), Kaohsiung, the black-and-white movie was inspired by a news story in 2003. It details a single father's struggle to maintain custody of his daughter against an unyielding bureaucracy. The film was the biggest winner at this year's Taipei Film Festival, with its principal actors Chen Wen-pin (陳文彬) and Lin Chih-ju (林志儒), both experienced filmmakers in their own rights, winning awards for best leading and supporting actor, respectively.

Taipei Times: You've said that going to the cinema was how you began to learn about the world. When and how did your love of movies begin?

Leon Dai: My father took me to watch movies starting when I was 3. In our small town in Taitung [County], going to the cinema was the main form of entertainment. We saw films with [martial-arts stars] Bruce Lee (李小龍), Jimmy Wang (王羽) and David Chiang (姜大衛).

When I was in second grade, I snuck into a movie theater by pretending to be someone's kid. My mom always had to look for me at the movie theater.

I stole money from my brother to see movies in junior high. I would watch each and every film listed on the movie pages, including pornography. The Lunar New Year was my favorite time of the year because there were lots of new films coming out. I would rush from one theater to the next and watch all of them in three days.

In college, I had a collection of more than 1,500 movies, more than the school library. The only person I knew who collected more films than I did was Huang Chien-yeh (黃建業) [a film scholar, critic and Dai's teacher at the National

Institute of the Arts (國立藝術學院, now the Taipei National University of the Arts (國立台北藝術大學)).

Even now, I often watch eight movies a day. I have to stop myself from going to the DVD store all the time.

(Dai studied at the National Institute of the Arts' theater department. After graduating he started his career in theater as an actor, director and technician, before gradually making a name for himself with roles in films such as *A Chance to Die* (想死趁現在), which earned him a Golden Horse Award for best supporting actor. Dai made his first foray into film directing in 2001 with the short film *Two Summers* (兩個夏天), which won a Golden Horse Award and the top prize at Taipei Film Festival.)

TT: Who are your favorite directors?

LD: Oh, there are too many. I think each director makes a least one masterpiece at a certain moment in his or her life. I like films by Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢), Edward Yang (楊德昌) and Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮) made at certain periods in their careers. I also like Lars von Trier and Luc Besson. *The Big Blue* is possibly the film I have seen the most.

TT: So the ocean is your favorite motif?

LD: Yes. I lived by the sea when I was a kid. My family moved to Kaohsiung when I grew older. I did my military service in Kinmen and I spent my college years by the Tamsui River (淡水河) estuary. I love the ocean and the borderline between land and the ocean.

TT: Speaking of the sea, let's talk about *No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti*. It's been reported that you had rewritten the script seven times before making it a simple, straightforward story. Can you explain the thinking behind that decision?

LD: The first two, three drafts felt like a work of reportage. I was trapped, knowing that I had to break away from realism but unable to do so. The script also changed as the budget got smaller. Many subplots were taken out to make the production simpler.

I hope that everyone can find something in the film that moves and speaks to them directly. If I made a realistic account of what happened to the father and daughter, the story would have become too narrow and specific. It would have had less power and influence.

TT: So there are many things about the protagonist, such as where he lives and how he makes a living, that are different from the father in the news story?

LD: Yes. I made a lot of changes and alterations.

TT: Then I must say your choice of Cijin and of the father's occupation as an unlicensed diver fits the story well and conveys the protagonist's state of mind.

LD: That's true. Cijin is on the border between the city and the ocean. It is like the story itself, a story about the dialogue between land and sea, heat and cold, hard and soft, people and the system. There are many layers of contrast in the movie. Fictional films don't merely portray outer reality. They have more potential to reflect on inner

truth than documentary cinema.

TT: The protagonist is a diver who does maintenance work on boats. How essential to the film are the underwater scenes?

LD: They are important to me. I don't know if you remember it or not, but there were five, six typhoons that hit Taiwan last summer. The water got murky each time a typhoon came. To have the water clear enough for the shooting, we had to wait for another week after the typhoon left. So when the film was due to be premiered at the Kaohsiung Film Festival last year, I didn't have the underwater footage and made a cut using material shot entirely on land.

The underwater scenes were shot and added to the film later, because I felt it was imperative to have them in a story for which the sea is as important as the land. Audiences may not notice the layers of contrast I mentioned, but hopefully they can feel a sense of balance.

TT: Why did you choose to shoot the film in black-and-white?

LD: The most important reason has to do with a sense of distance. Every day, when we turn on the television or read the newspaper, we see blood, dead people and other images that would have shocked most people if they had seen them 15 years ago. But how are we different than we were 15 years ago? I think that in order to survive violence, our body has developed a defense mechanism to ignore things we can't bear watching.

Things that are too real and naked hurt audiences. They will switch on this defense mechanism and turn away. Black-and-white images create a distance. It's far enough to not injure audiences and close enough for them to enter the story.

TT: Did the choice of black-and-white cinematography pose any unexpected challenges?

LD: My generation of filmmakers has very little experience of black-and-white cinematography. The whole crew had to learn everything all over again.

The experience earned from making color films doesn't apply. For example, lots of colors look the same in black-and-white images. We needed to create layers in the actor's hair by dyeing it so it didn't look like one chunk of black on film. I also learned that if you want some areas to look darker on film, you simply pour a bucket of water over them. We had great fun making the movie.

TT: Why did you pick two film directors as your principal actors? Do you favor amateur actors over professional ones?

LD: Actually, I had five directors in my crew. There are just way too many directors in Taiwan [laughing]. The majority of my friends have experience directing. So when I called on them for help, I easily got a team of directors together.

I used amateur actors because this film is based on a true story. Familiar faces are a hindrance because when audiences see an actor they know, they think: OK, I am going to watch a show.

If I had had the budget and the resources, I would have been able to create a closed space that belonged solely to the movie and one in which recognizable actors could have been integrated into.

TT: How did you direct Chen and Lin as first-time actors?

LD: Film acting is a montage. Actors may be inexperienced and their performances may cause lots of

worried looks on the set, but I know I can make them look good in the editing room. My experience has taught me that the kind of acting that earns a big round of applause on the set is a big headache to editors.

The most useful and workable acting for cinema should be neutral. Neutral performances are raw material. You can build a beautiful house with 100 bricks. But 100 houses can hardly make one big house.

When Tony Leung Chiu-wai (梁朝偉) said he didn't know what he was doing when shooting *In the Mood for Love* (花樣年華), he was just being modest. What he did was deliver neutral acting so that William Chang Suk-ping (張叔平) had plenty of room to play with when editing the film. Why I am talking about this?

TT: We were talking about how you direct actors.

LD: I use tricks. Three years ago I told Chen that I wanted him to play the father, and to increase his interest, I said to him: I will make you a best leading actor. I asked him to let his hair grow 18 months before the shooting. I knew that when his hair was as long as a bum's other people would treat him differently. To put it simply, we don't talk to a man in a suit the same way we talk to a hippie.

His wife would talk to him differently. People on the MRT would look at him differently. He gradually became closer to the character. He didn't act to become the father. He slowly got closer and closer to the character's state of mind without actually realizing it. I don't think Chen knows about this even know [laughing].

TT: Here comes the inevitable question: Why does the film have a Spanish title?

LD: You want to produce a product but don't have enough capital. The best way for you to maximize your money is to make a specialty product. I want people in different countries to see my film. If I call it "I Can't Live Without You," it won't stand out among all the other films with English titles. But with the name *No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti*, the meaning of which perfectly fits the original Taiwanese title I wanted to use — "I'd Die Without You" (沒你我會死), people will remember the movie. They will instantly know it is a Taiwanese movie shot in black-and-white and with a Spanish title.

You can say it is a creative marketing scheme [laughing].

TT: Are you interested in telling different stories rather than concentrating on making films that have a strong social message like this one?

LD: Of course. Like Luc Besson, I think every subject matter can make an engaging story. My expectation of myself as a director is to become an excellent storyteller.

TT: What do you think about contemporary Taiwanese cinema?

LD: *Cape No. 7* (海角七號) did what local filmmakers have been trying to achieve since six, seven years ago. That is, to draw local audiences back to the theater. Now we have to work on this renaissance connection with audiences and make more films different in styles and genres to rekindle audiences' interests.

We have to be sure not to emulate and repeat what has been done. Hong Kong cinema consumed itself by doing that, and we should be careful not to commit the same mistake.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Leon Dai can't live without cinema

As an actor and director, Leon Dai has enjoyed plenty of success in mainstream Taiwanese cinema. But he employed a variety of unconventional techniques for his latest film, 'No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti'

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