

In February, 1990, director Peter Wang visited San Francisco for a round of interviews concerning his new film, *The Laserman*.

Wang was born in Beijing and raised in Taiwan, where his family fled after the revolution in 1949. In school, he was the class clown, hated by his teachers but loved by his classmates. At the age of 18, Wang had dreams of joining a traveling acting troupe. His father, however, persuaded him instead to study electrical engineering at Taiwan University. Wang completed his education at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a doctorate in electro-optics, or laser technology. He soon found himself doing laser research for the military by day and protesting the Vietnam War by night. Eventually, the hypocrisy of his predicament made him decide to leave research for good.

After stints at teaching and a job at IBM, Wang returned to his first love, theater. He became a founding member of the Asian Living Theater in San Francisco, writing and acting in numerous bilingual plays. Wang made his film debut in Wang Wang's *Chan Is Missing*, playing the zany short order cook. Wang then went on to make several documentaries. In 1984, he directed his first feature film, *A Great Wall*, which was the first American feature film to be produced by the People's Republic of China. *The Laserman* is Wang's second feature film.

Q: *The Laserman* has some of the most eccentric characters I've seen in a long time. To what extent are they inspired by real people?

A: Oh, every one of them is real. I just dramatize them a little bit, such as Arthur's girlfriend, Janet. You can find these kind of very desirable, interesting women in New York, or maybe in Berkeley. They're very much into Oriental culture, into meditation; they start losing the natural sexual desires.

Q: I was especially fascinated by the character of Ruth, who thinks a Chinese soul is trapped in her Jewish body. How did that idea pop into your head?

A: I met a few of them myself. They were quoting Confucius and telling me the proper way to cook Chinese food, although most of [their food] tastes dreadful. There are this type of people around, and it fascinates me, really.

Q: The actors in *The Laserman* seem quite at home in their roles. Was casting the film difficult or did you write the characters with specific actors in mind?

A: No, I never write any script with specific actors in mind. That's why I never really write a character for Robert De Niro; I know that I cannot afford him. I wrote these characters out of my own

ideas and imaginations. But the trick is when you go out searching for those actors and actresses, you try your best to match your original script. Once you make up your mind, you should allow yourself to have the freedom to change your script around the character. Usually that method works better.

Q: Your character in the film is preoccupied with both Eastern philosophy and Western technology; to what extent are you playing yourself?

A: I'm losing my Eastern philosophy everyday. And I'm not familiar with Western technology as long as I'm staying in filmmaking (chuckles). So I think every day and every minute I'm losing my identity terribly.

Q: One of the ironies of the film is that it's a moral contemplation, or discussion, of technology, but at the same time the film, in and of itself, is a triumph of technology, at least the technology of filmmaking.

A: The technology of filmmaking cannot really be classified as high-tech at all. I'll tell you: filmmaking process is so primitive that they haven't really improved it in the last 75 years. The theme we address in the film about high technology's advancement [which will] eventually probably endanger human species in this planet is for real. I do feel that way. I think people's intelligence is not really evenly spread. Some are more intelligent than others. The danger of today's world or tomorrow's is that the people who are making the most important, most decisive decisions for the future are the people who are less intelligent.... Ronald Reagan or Gerald Ford: I wouldn't think their IQ is really high enough to enter graduate school.... But surprisingly enough, they are the people that will push the button, making the decision which will, in fact, influence our future. And the most intelligent people in this world, like all the Nobel Laureates ... they don't make decisions. They shy away from decisions. Maybe they know the consequences too well. And most of them are so delighted to be toilet papers; they like to clean the act after the disaster. Why human history has to be determined this way? That's my question.

Q: Which film was more challenging to make: *A Great Wall* or *The Laserman*? And why?

A: Definitely, *The Laserman* was a more difficult film from the very beginning because it addresses ideas ... that are hard to explain to investors. Even today, it's hard to explain to a lot of people in the business. It is more complicated; it involves total shooting in the United States and also [requires] a lot of special effects. It's a complicated process, but

I am very happy with the film. I think it achieves most of the goals I had in mind.

Q: Several major studios wooed you after your success with *A Great Wall*, but you rejected their offers and chose instead to make *The Laserman*. Do you think you'll always be an independent filmmaker or do you eventually see yourself making films with the studios?

A: [The major studios were] interested; we had a lot of conversations, but probably they detected that I was so obsessed with the idea of making *Laserman* that they all shied away.... No, I think it is not by my choice—or maybe it *is* by my choice—I remain independent, doing these smaller projects. But in order to maintain integrity, at this moment I feel it is very difficult to accept the studios' terms. But, you know, I don't want to sound like I'm a guy with a high moral principle. If the price is right, I'll sell out.

Q: What do you think will be the fate of independent filmmaking? Every time the independents seem dead, a movie like *sex, lies, and videotape* comes along and surprises everyone.

A: That's true. I think that's encouraging.... Seemingly the majors, the big studios, are going to eat up the whole pie, but wrong again. The audience knows better.... They demand some films with a little bit more interest, more content in there. They're fed up with the old formula film. So I think that intrinsically, among the audiences, there are intelligent audiences. A lot of audiences want to see better films, smaller budget maybe. So, as long as that kind of demand is there, there's always room for independents.

Q: You seem to take great pleasure in acting. Do you plan to act in all of your films?

A: That's not by choice either because no other director or producer wants to hire me. So if I want to continue to act a little bit, I have to act in my own film. Yeah, that's [one motivation] to be a director: I'm a frustrated actor.

Q: What do you consider to be the most important ingredient in filmmaking? What's the most important aspect of the film to make it successful?

A: By all means, the characters. The film so far as it develops, except for a few different kinds of films, you're talking about the behavioral activities of human beings. So people will remember individual characters in the film, interesting characters. What they say. What they do. Two years after you see a particular film, you start to forget the plot, forget a lot of things. But if it is a good film, the character will remain in your head. But a film must have a plot, it must have a structure, it must have a lot of other things, in order to reach that kind of effect.

Q: Who are some of the directors that you admire and look up to?

A: I only mention directors who are deceased, because every time I want to [name] some director I admire very much, the next thing you notice: he's turned out something that's totally intolerable. So I admire Jean Renoir, the guy in France. I think his work is very good, very interesting, and very fluent. At one time, I admired Japanese directors, like the earlier work of Kurosawa. And I like some of Fellini's and Bergman's work. And American directors, I think John Ford is a director who's totally underrated.

Q: Your films have been very concerned with the Chinese-American experience. Is that going to continue in your future works?

A: Again, this is not by choice. If I want to make independent films and write my own scripts, I have to base it on the experiences that I am familiar with. And (laughs) I happen to be Chinese-American. Not that I intentionally do it this way, but born as a Chinese living in America, that's the only story I can tell.

Q: I thought we'd finish off the interview with the real nitty gritty. After seeing *The Laserman*, everyone is going to want to know if Matzo balls in soy sauce taste as disgusting as they look. Maybe you can enlighten us.

A: Don't try it. It's terrible. (laughs) That's something we invented; there's no such thing existing. But if you're willing to try it, prepare to have some indigestion pills.

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