

JET LI

DANNY THE DOG IS UNLEASHED

BY JOEL MARASIGAN

Of your friends, who didn't run around practicing their flying kicks and swordplay? I showed my expertise with my Mandarin Drunken Eagle Claw style. After the Saturday afternoon "Kung-Fu Theater" movie I ran around all day yelling, "Your Kung-Fu is not strong. I will avenge my master and defeat you once and for all!"



When I arrived at my 4 p.m. appointment at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills, Calif., Jet Li was wrapping up an interview. Putting down his Buddhist prayer beads, he stood to greet me, and it became apparent that the big screen not only added 10 pounds to his 150—it added about five inches to make him a 6-footer.

Jet Li is this generation's Bruce Lee. With 30-plus movies to his credit, he seems ready to place himself in the "legendary" column of the Hong Kong Action Star category. His latest, *Unleashed*, (*Danny the Dog* in Europe—which, in my humble opinion, is a much cooler name) should be in theaters about the time of this issue's printing.





ZNR: Do you have any favorites?

JL: <pausing to think> I don't have a favorite; I don't have a favorite food; I don't have a favorite movie. The philosophy of having a favorite is American. At 5 years old your favorite will change by the time you are 6. As you grow up you change everything. I think of life as a circle—not the American way of “straight”. I can say that I like some things, for example, I like light foods.

ZNR: Do you have any inspirations from your past, perhaps a mentor?

JL: I don't have one. I don't compare. I believe each human being is different: They grow up different; parents are different, etc. You will suffer if you compare something. My biggest enemy is myself. I always fight myself and try to beat myself.

ZNR: In one movie you used a fire hose as a substitute for the chain dart. In the 30-plus movies you've been in, have you discovered techniques that look better on film than say in competition?

JL: For film it's a different type of strategy. You should use what makes sense for the character and for that character's situation. In a warehouse you would have different things to use than if you were in a hospital. What makes sense is what's better for the movie. In the movie, martial arts are the material to help the story and the character. In the sport of martial arts you want to focus on becoming the champion—it is the material in that context.

ZNR: In *Danny the Dog*, Danny wildly fought a

baddie in a space the size of a toilet stall—I don't ever remember seeing a more exciting close-quarters fight scene.

JL: Danny, mentally, is a dog. Something happened to him when he was a child, and he can only remember a little from his past. He grows and learns about life, love, compassion, family and whatever, and he learns to control himself. When we created the character we tried to use different martial arts to help him. In the first sequences he's really like a dog. In a regular martial arts film the character will punch this, kick that and look at the opponents at the same time. But Danny focuses on one opponent—like a dog. He'll keep his focus on the opponent—even though people are hurting him during his attack. He doesn't care. When the first one is down, he turns and attacks the next person.

ZNR: Even his punches are different. Danny basically beats on the guy until he stops moving.

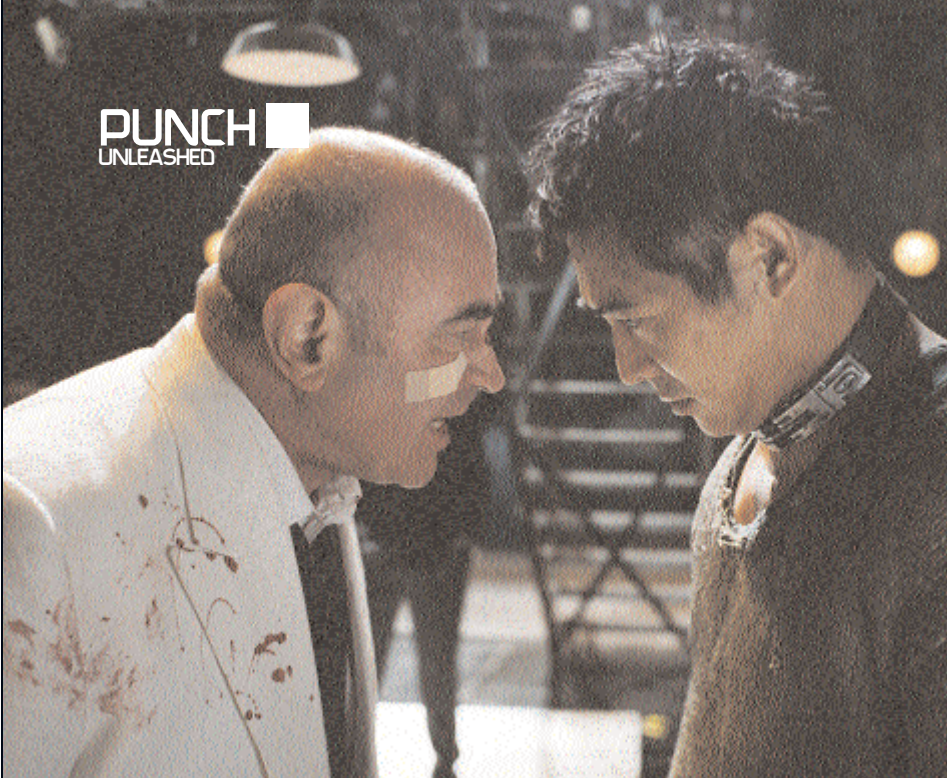
JL: We didn't want to use a martial arts style. He needed to have a different fighting style. “Jet Li” has fans and we wanted to break all the rules. We only used martial arts to help the character. In the end Danny will even bite you. As for the end sequences, you have to understand that we shot them in Paris. It is a very old city where everything is very tight—for example, the elevators fit only two people. It is an area that really is better off for the dog. The fight will be about who is stronger in the head. In that bathroom scene I even throw an unexpected kick to the head.

ZNR: *Black Mask* was the first full-length “Jet Li movie” designed for a U.S. release. This was then followed up with your part in *Lethal Weapon 4*. Did you notice the increase in your American fan base?

JL: I noticed Hollywood studios were hiring Hong Kong actors and directors, but it really was the audience's doing. A studio isn't smart enough to do something first. They have to

I DON'T COMPARE. MY BIGGEST ENEMY IS MYSELF.

build up the market—like the release of *Black Mask*. When the studio smelled what the audience wanted, they then believed they had a market. So when the audience wanted to see more Hong Kong martial arts on big screens, the studio put more money into production by adding better special effects, explosions, sound quality and music. From my understanding, Chinatowns in the '70s and early-'80s were in urban communities. These communities had their videotapes and they were passed around by schoolmates with the idea that they had cool fighting. Then in the '80s and early-'90s video games started to have a lot of cool fighting. In the '90s, studios discovered there were people in Hong Kong who



could actually do what these video games were doing.

ZNR: In the urban arena, everybody wants to see a Jet Li movie. Is there a particular urban artist you would want to work with?

JL: Honestly, those types of movies only work in America. It doesn't work in Europe and Asia. We're focused on the worldwide audience.

Cradle to the Grave was only for the States and the market liked it. Outside nobody liked it. The culture is different.

ZNR: I thought since a popular rap artist like DMX was in it people would like it.

JL: Who is DMX outside of the States? People don't know, and they don't care. People asked, "Why did they make a shitty movie in the States?" People outside the States said the story didn't make any sense. Yet in the States the movie made a lot of money. The same can be said when great Asian actors come to the United States. People say, "Who's that? We don't care." Since it's difficult to balance this big triangle (Asia, America, Europe) I have to continue to make three different types of films. It's a lot of work to make Chinese, European and American films. You can't make one movie that everybody in the world will like. *Hero* broke all the records in Asia, and in Europe it did great, but in the States it was just okay. The hip hop people are like: "What's that? He just flies around? I don't understand the story." Each movie has a different focus and a different strategy to attract an audience.

ZNR: What have you learned to make films do better at the box office?

JL: I like to do movies that I believe in. Like *Unleashed*. No major American studio wanted to do it. They thought it wouldn't work in America. That's why I brought the movie to Europe. In the

beginning I told them I was going to do an action movie and they showed the money right away—they showed me the check. When I gave them the script to read they took back the check! So we went to Europe to make it and came back to show it to American studios. They said again, "It's a great movie—but it's still not going to work." It's not surprising. It's happened before and not just to Jet Li movies. It's happened to *Star Wars*, *Rocky*—with the *Matrix* it took four years to find financing and support. But that's how it works.

ZNR: You've made a lot of sequels in your career as well.

JL: Well, *Once Upon a Time in China* was good enough to have a lot of sequels, but if it doesn't work you can't get to part two!

ZNR: Is there a comic book character you'd like to play or would be perfect for?

JL: My English is not good enough to be a major character. I don't think an American studio would believe I could be a major character.

ZNR: I heard about a TV show you did with Mel Gibson. Will you still continue to try that route?

JL: Mel is a very good actor and has a very big heart. After working with him on *Lethal Weapon*, he told me he'd support me in whatever I wanted to do in America. I told him I wanted to make a television series. So we both found a story and we produced and shot a pilot. That was four years ago. We showed it and it wasn't very successful, so we stopped. Right now I'm trying to do something different and for the little kids. I did a video game for PlayStation called *Rise to Honor*. Tomorrow I am going to San Diego, Calif., to do part two. That game is for 8-year-olds and up. I also wanted to make a cartoon for the 5-year-olds—they can't watch my violent films. I've been working on the cartoon

now for the past two years. In this business you have to take time—maybe two or three more years for this project.

ZNR: You have to pass the nunchakus sometime. Do you see any promising wu-shu students who could replace you and Jackie Chan?

JL: We want to have one. We have been talking about this for years. He's 52 and I'm 42. We're getting old and we need someone 19 or 20! Everyone in China is doing martial arts movies and we've been looking and trying to find the next generation Hong Kong action actors and

WHEN I SHOWED THEM THE SCRIPT... THEY TOOK BACK THE CHECK!

we haven't found one yet. We need a lot of money to promote him. For Jet Li and Jackie Chan you don't need that because every one knows us—Jackie has maybe 90 tapes. Like I said everyone makes movies, both big and small, and there's no one.

ZNR: Well, if you want to train a brother and sister team, my black belt 7-year-old niece, Jenelle, is very willing!

JL: Who knows? Maybe.

As the interview wrapped up, I started to believe Jet Li was the living and breathing manifestation of my childhood's undefeatable karate master. He must have hit me with some secret punch or something because after grabbing his autograph and shaking hands he escorted me to the door where I strolled off like a sleepy schoolboy, barely remembering to scoop up my laptop and tape recorder. I grabbed the car from the valet and hustled down Santa Monica Blvd. a couple blocks before pulling into a Koo Koo Roo parking lot bright-eyed with the realization that his Kung-Fu WAS better than mine.

English Name: Jet Li

Cantonese Name: Li Lian Jie

Born: April 26, 1963 Beijing, China

Height: 5 feet 6 inches

Weight: 145 pounds

Web site: www.JetLi.com

About *Unleashed* aka *Danny The Dog*:

Danny (Jet Li) is a slave who has lived his whole life without human interaction. He has the mind of a young child and is treated like a dog by his owner/boss. Managed through the collar around his neck, the only thing he's learned throughout his life is how to fight. He meets a kind, elderly piano tuner (Morgan Freeman) who leads him to humanity.