

Interview: Legendary Tony Leung Becomes ‘The Grandmaster’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 26, 2013 - 4:30pm

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CHICAGO – Tony Leung is a living legend. The man has appeared in too many important films of the last several decades to count, being one of the muses for icons like John Woo (“Hard Boiled,” “Red Cliff”), Andrew Lau (“Infernal Affairs,” which was remade into “The Departed”), and, most of all, Wong Kar-Wai. “The Grandmaster,” now open in some markets and premiering this Friday, August 30, 2013 in Chicago, reunites the two in a historical drama about one of the final legends of kung fu, a martial arts master who would end up teaching Bruce Lee most of what he knew. Leung sat down with HollywoodChicago.com and The Scorecard Review for a brief chat about how a pacifist becomes a cinematic kung fu legend.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: In this film, martial arts is part of the character’s journey. How do you, as an actor, use the physical to express as much about the character as dialogue possibly could? Can you speak about the importance of martial arts as a language, a way of expression, for you as an actor?

TONY LEUNG: I think learning the technique is not that difficult but I think to have the understanding of kung fu — the knowledge of kung fu — is more important. In order to portray a grandmaster, you need your own understanding. You need to have your own perspective and vision of kung fu. You need a lot of knowledge. It really helps for me to get the soul of the grandmaster. I did action movies before but I never had this kind of understanding of kung fu. This time really makes it so different from action I’ve done before. If you understand kung fu, you know that this is a way to train your mind. There’s a lot of stillness in this movie even when they’re fighting. If you don’t understand the state of mind of this kind of grandmaster, you will just have nothing in your eyes. In order to understand, you have to study books about how the kung fu greats went through and what is the spiritual side. If you have that, then you know the mental state and what you are thinking in that moment, this makes the action different. I spent a lot of time on it. You can’t just read two books. That’s the reason we take so much time in practicing. It took four years in training in kung fu. I broke my arm twice. Then you can start to train your mind. First, you work with your physical and then you reach some maturity and then you start to train your mind. I really learned a lot. This is an amazing journey. I learned nothing about kung fu and was a big fan of Bruce Lee and knew Ip Man because of Bruce Lee. What was in my mind was just the fighting technique. I was not allowed to learn kung fu because my mother said there were only two kind of people who knew kung fu — policemen and gangsters. So I think it’s very meaningful for me to have the chance to do a kung fu movie.



The Grandmaster
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It sounds like a journey that changed you personally and not just for the production of the film.

LEUNG: Yes, yes. After I studied kung fu, I asked how come kung fu has a four thousand year history? It still exists. It survives. I found out that during the transformation of kung fu, it was greatly influenced by Chinese philosophy — Daoism, Zen, I Ching. It was very interesting to discover. The philosophy in kung fu can apply to real life. The philosophy is not to dominate your opponent but to achieve harmony within and with nature. I hate punching people. This is the difficult thing. But I enjoyed the spiritual side very much. But in order to develop that you side, you have to...



The Grandmaster
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Punch people.

LEUNG: Yes. (Laughs.) You can't learn it from reading two books. You have to understand the theory and put it into real practice and it will somehow grow spontaneously inside you. You have to do it with hard work. I realized I knew nothing about my heritage; my culture.

THE SCORECARD REVIEW: This has come after a long relationship with you and Wong Kar-Wai. Do you think if this had come to you two at a younger age, would you still have been able to do it? Or did a lot of it come down to your familiarity with how he works with his extensive shoots? Would it have come out the same way or could you have given the commitment at a younger age?

LEUNG: I think this is the right timing for us. He had the idea of doing this movie dating back to 1996. He had the idea after he saw a picture of Bruce Lee in a book when we were making "Happy Together." He was curious who was behind and who inspired this man. After we finished this movie, I don't think I could have done it at that age. I think this is right time for us. This is the proper moment.

THE SCORECARD REVIEW: You said that you didn't like punching. Was there anything else that you disagreed with Wong on or just couldn't do?

LEUNG: This is the only one I can't do. We always have something I can't do in our experiences. We were making "Happy Together" and we were in the slaughterhouse and I needed to hold the electrode and shock the cow and make him move and they were going to kill the cow and I couldn't do it. They kept rolling for like 20 takes and I said, "I just can't." It's like punching people.





The Grandmaster
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You have consistent working relationships with a number of directors. How is Wong Kar-Wai different from the other directors that you’ve worked with repeatedly?

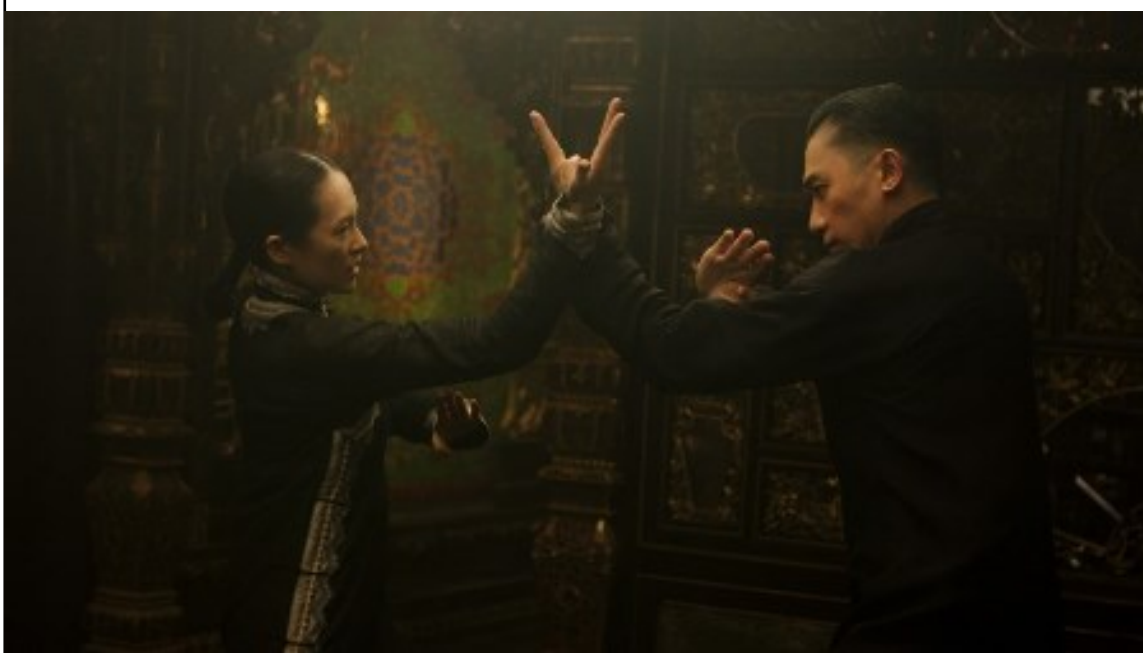
LEUNG: He’s very different at telling stories. I met him and thought, “I can feel him.” His way of telling stories is very attractive, very romantic. After we did the first movie together and when I went to a screening, I thought, “This is the man I want to work with.” I have the same feelings as him. If he shows me a book, I know what he wants. To me, I don’t have the talent to project it in images or music. He’s the one who can. We are the same kind of people. We have great passion and will try our best no matter what happens. We try to do it as perfect as we can. And our relationship is very strange. We know each other for more than twenty years but we seldom hang out. Maybe like ten times. We don’t talk much. We never talk on set.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Is that true with Andrew Lau and John Woo as well? Do you just have a thing where you separate personal and professional lives?

LEUNG: No, no, no.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It’s unique to Wong?

LEUNG: Yes. We need to keep a distance from each other. He always wants me to guess what he wants to do. After all these years, I think I know what he wants. I never watch playback. And, of course, he never shows us the script but I know he has the script. He never lets us know. He wants us to experience and explore ourselves. This time, I had some real character to work on. This time, it was different. I never had that much preparation with other movies with Kar-Wai. I had more here because of the kung fu thing and the real character. There’s a lot of preparation I can do. This is the most enjoyable Wong Kar-Wai movie. I was very confident because I knew my character very well. I know how to react. I don’t need to know the story but I need to know who I am so I know how to react. I enjoyed this one very much.



The Grandmaster
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

THE SCORECARD REVIEW: When you’re doing the sequence like the rain one that took 30 days, does that try your confidence? Was that scene challenging, mentally?

LEUNG: Yes, yes. That was my first scene. I remember 40 overnights. And the weather was extremely cold and Kar-Wai makes it more difficult with heavy rain and a slippery ground. We did the master shot first. That means that you have to fight like 15 people and they need to memorize two moves but I need to memorize 30 moves. It’s a huge team and everyone is so professional. You have a lot of pressure. You

don't want them to have to do it again because of YOU. That was a nightmare. That was the most difficult scene I've done in my acting career. Not just the action but the weather and you have to take care of the camera movement and everything. After 20 days of shooting, I had a runny nose and a headache every night and took cold tablets and I went to Kar-Wai and said, "I cannot do it any more. I'm very sick." He says OK and then it's TEN MORE NIGHTS. And I went straight to hospital after that scene. I lied in my bed for five days.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Did you ever think about giving up? It could have been 60 days or 80 days?

LEUNG: At least you could die...there's no other option. I never complained before but this time I did. I was just trying to tell him the situation. He's used to pushing me that far.

See how far Tony Leung was pushed when “The Grandmaster” opens in Chicago on Friday, August 30, 2013.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [13]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

brian@hollywoodchicago.com [12]

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