

Interview: Directors Mark Osborne, John Stevenson Create Balance Between Action, Zen in ‘Kung Fu Panda’

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CHICAGO – In this summer movie season of old men with whips, gals in stilettos and superheroes a go-go, you may ask: “Where’s the cartoon?” (“[Speed Racer](#) [19]” doesn’t count.) Indeed, the most highly anticipated animation event of the summer is “Kung Fu Panda”.



Filled with the voices of “A”-list Hollywood stars and featuring a classic combination of well-choreographed action, laugh-out-loud comedy and feel-good philosophy, “Panda” doesn’t pander and works on all levels.

HollywoodChicago.com recently interviewed “Kung Fu Panda” co-directors Mark Osborne and John Stevenson about putting together a major animated project for the first time and how their lead actor, Jack Black, helped shaped the destiny of the final product.



After having spent 20 years in the inescapable Chorgh-Gom Prison, Tai Lung (Ian McShane) makes his daring escape in DreamWorks’ “Kung Fu Panda”.

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

“There was a general desire to return to that classic, timeless sense of story that Mark and I remembered as we were growing up,” Stevenson said. “We just wanted to make a story and a world that would endure and would be its own, self-contained universe.”





Unexpectedly chosen to fulfill an ancient prophecy and train in the art of kung fu, giant panda Po (Jack Black, above) begins his study under Master Shifu (Dustin Hoffman, below) in DreamWorks’ “Kung Fu Panda”.
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

“As for the films that inspired us most with animated action, there is no higher bar than ‘The Incredibles,’” Osborne said. “That was a film we looked at not necessarily as a template but for the level of quality and sophistication of the action.”

Jack Black is cast perfectly as the voice of Po: a lumpy panda bear working at his father’s noodle shop in China’s Valley of Peace. Po is an advocate of the fighting cult of kung fu and has kept up with the heroics of the “Furious Five” – Monkey, Mantis, Crane, Viper and Tigress – animals based on the fighting style.

They have been trained to protect the valley by Master Shifu (the voice of Dustin Hoffman) against the rages of evil, avenge-seeking tiger Tai Lung (Ian McShane). One of the five is about to be crowned the top warrior, which is also known as the “Dragon Master”.

Osborne praises the lead voice actor: “We rewrote and rebuilt the original story around Jack Black. That was one of the great things that happened in the genesis of the project. It is perfect casting.”

He added: “There was a lot of inspiration from Jack as a person, Jack’s movie characters and what we knew of Jack especially in association with Tenacious D. We took a lot of inspiration from all that in creating this ultimate fanboy character.”



Seth Rogen voices the fast and quick-tempered Mantis (one of the legendary Furious Five) in DreamWorks’ “Kung Fu Panda”.
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

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“Jack gave a huge gift really early on about bending the concept to make it work,” Stevenson said. “There were interesting choices to be made and it all came from Jack.”

He added: “When he started doing his first sessions as Po, we all imagined that it might be Tenacious D Jack or something more cocky and abrasive. But Jack himself started to do these more vulnerable and ‘self aware of your failings’ kind of readings.”

Through a series of misadventures, Po becomes the Dragon Master and must endure the rejection and jealousy of the Furious Five along with Shifu’s reluctant training. When Tai Lung escapes from prison, it’s up to Po to put into practice the teachings of his master and trust what he has learned to defeat the foe.

The story evolved through several renderings before Osborne and Stevenson found the right tenor.

Stevenson explained: “While we knew Po would eventually have to go one on one with Tai Lung, we didn’t want him to cheat, use magic, turn into Bruce Lee all of a sudden or have him do things you hadn’t seen him do before.”


He continued: “In the Tao Te Ching, there was this stanza in there: ‘The sapling that bends in the breeze is greater than the mighty oak that is rigid.’ It ends with this couplet: ‘The hard and strong will fall. The soft and weak will overcome.’ When we read that, we said ‘hurrah’! We found our overall philosophy.”

“Also, the philosophical underpinning of the story is that Master Shifu and Po are a balance of opposites,” Osborne expressed. “Villain Tai Lung and Po are a balance of opposites. We thought to build everything on that and we started to discover things.”

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The fluid nature and the excitement of the action sequences – epic without being cartoony – are the centerpiece of the film’s legitimacy.

“One of the big conceits of the film was to use the five original animal fighting styles,” Stevenson said. “The Furious Five in the film actually personify them. It was kung fu in such a way that honored its source, but it also did it in a way you’ve never seen before because it was animals doing it instead of human beings.”

Bring the kids and line up for the popcorn as the result is a fundamental balance and a perfect summer animated classic. Osborne concluded: “It had to be authentic and still feel like kung fu, but at the same time, we knew we had to find our own path and our own way of doing things.”

In all, “Kung Fu Panda” features the voice talent of Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, Angelina Jolie, Ian McShane, Jackie Chan, Seth Rogen, Lucy Liu, David Cross, Dan Fogler and Michael Clarke Duncan.

“Kung Fu Panda” opened everywhere on June 6, 2008.



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