

Gong Li: It's strange to play a woman drawn to this violent, dark side...

Here & Now

From *Ju Dou* to *Raise The Red Lantern*, she was the face of Chinese cinema in the late '80s and early '90s. She's seduced Hollywood with eye-catching turns in *Memoirs Of A Geisha* and *Miami Vice* and she'll next be seen in *Lecter* prequel *Hannibal Rising*. Then she reunites with director Zhang Yimou for *Curse Of The Golden Flower* and after that she'll partner Jim Caviezel in '50s-era spy thriller *The Yellow M.*

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When the *Miami Vice* shoot overran, *Hannibal Rising's* producers pushed their start date back two months instead of casting somebody else. Must have been flattering...

I really wanted to do the part. I admired the scriptwriter [Thomas Harris] and the director [Peter Webber]. And I appreciated very much that they waited. I was grateful to be given the role.

So tell us about playing Hannibal's auntie, Lady Murasaki...

I wanted to make Murasaki a very strong character. She's extremely isolated: she lost all her family in Hiroshima and her husband died. But she's a strange mixture because she has both a good side and a dark, evil side. She has a lot in common with Hannibal; she understands him. They have similar backgrounds, the difference being that she can control her dark side. She tries to help Hannibal control his, but it's too late. I wanted to make her a strange, unusual figure.

There's also a romantic connection between the two...

There is an emotional attachment that develops between them, but their love is complicated. The family connection means it's not the usual kind of love!

What's her attraction to the dark side?

She's fascinated by the way the Japanese worship their ancestors and all the violence implied in that culture. But she also knows that she can control that fascination and not actually act out the interest. It's strange to play the part of a woman who's drawn to this violent, dark side. She uses her intelligence to get what she wants. She introduces Hannibal to a certain kind of world – a kind of life, as it were – and so has a strong influence on his later development.

How many of the previous Hannibal films have you seen, and which one's your favourite?

I've seen all of the films before. *The Silence Of The Lambs* is my favourite, especially the performances of Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins. They use their eyes to say so much. I've seen *Silence* many, many times.

This is your third film speaking in English. Is it getting any easier?

Geisha was the first film I did where I spoke in English. It's hard to memorise the words; there couldn't be too many changes to the dialogue on set. Jumping between English and Chinese and Japanese was difficult. But acting in English was not a problem. Acting is about the performance, not memorising words.

It must have been especially difficult mouthing Michael Mann's jargon-heavy dialogue...

Yes, I played the head of a drug cartel and there were some technical terms that I had to learn very carefully! It was made worse by Michael having me play a Cuban Chinese, so I had to express the lines with an accent!


Why the sudden surge in English-language movies? Were you waiting for the right offers?

It's not that I've been waiting. In the past, the kind of parts that I got sent were 'the flower part' – characters who would just appear in the story to look pretty but who weren't important. Those parts were a waste of time for me. But now it seems like things are changing; these last three roles I've had – *Geisha*, *Miami Vice* and *Hannibal Rising* – are all important characters that allowed me to use my talents.

Did it bother you that *Geisha* got so much stick for casting three non-Japanese actresses in the main roles?

I don't mind about what people have said. When I look at a role, it doesn't matter what country she is from. I'm just playing a woman. What's important is to try and make that woman alive on the screen.

Is Lady Murasaki aware of the gory things Hannibal might be getting up to in his spare time?

Murasaki knows exactly what Hannibal's up to. They think the same way. 

***Hannibal Rising* opens on 9 February and will be reviewed in the next issue.**

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