One of the kings of the Asian action scene, actor Donnie Yen (HERO, 14 BLADES, the IP MAN films) again proves himself a master of flying fists and feet in the Weinstein Company/Radius release DRAGON (a.k.a. WU XIA), which opens in theaters this Friday and is currently available On Demand and iTunes.

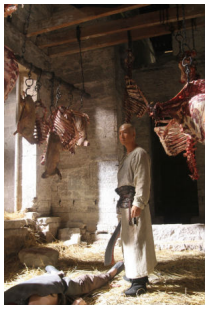
In DRAGON, Yen plays Liu Jin-xi, a village craftsman whose quiet life is irrevocably shattered by the arrival of two notorious gangsters at the corner store. When Liu single-handedly obliterates the bad guys, he comes under the suspicion of detective Xu Bai-jiu (Takeshi Kaneshiro). Convinced that Liu's martial arts mastery belies a secret history of training by one of the region's vicious clans, Xu doggedly pursues the shy hero—and draws the unwanted attention of China's criminal underworld in the process. Directed by Peter Ho-Sun Chan from a script by Oi Wah Lam, DRAGON pays tribute to the 1967 martial arts favorite THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN, and the basic storyline also echoes David Cronenberg's A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE. In this exclusive interview, Yen talks about his complex character and working on DRAGON's exciting kung-fu sequences.

FANGORIA: How important are film festivals like Montreal's Fantasia and the New York Asian Film Festival to movies like DRAGON?

DONNIE YEN: Actually, I'm not too sure, but I do know that the world is getting smaller. Instead of having to go see mainstream films, audiences have many choices. Instead of watching the box office top-10 mainstream Hollywood selections, you can watch all sorts of films, especially action films. The international language is body language, so all audiences across the world can relate to the same thing.

FANG: What attracted you to DRAGON?

YEN: It's a very interesting storyline. It's very fresh. It's a detective story. As an actor, I was very thrilled to be able to play two roles in the film, [beginning with] a farmer with no action and no martial arts ability. And, of course, at the end of a Donnie Yen film, you expect a little punching and kicking, so the hero side of the [same] character gave me the opportunity to once again demonstrate my action performances on screen. It was quite thrilling, but at the same time, it was confusing at points because a lot of times, in order to save time, we had to shoot scenes with me playing two different characters back to back, so I had to switch roles. "OK, so I have to be this person…" "CUT!" Same angle, the same shots. "OK, now I have to be THIS character…" That was quite challenging and different for me as an actor too, because usually you just play one [facet of a] character and you spend months playing that character to play that character well. But for this movie, not only did I have to play the character well, but I had to play TWO characters [well].



FANG: Can you talk about the fight choreography that you created for DRAGON?

YEN: In Hong Kong, if you're the action choreographer, you're [also] the director of the action, so what it does is let you dictate how the choreography is going to look at the end, from choreographing body movements to placement of the cameras in the final cut. We have a lot of preplanning of the concept of the action, the flavor of the action, the direction of the action many weeks before we actually get into production, which of course you sort of scan through it with your director and producer. So all along, I had in mind for DRAGON that I wanted to do something aside from the normal Donnie Yen straight-up, very-high-impact-violence-type of film. I wanted it to be a little more fresh, simply. I wanted it to be fresh and something more than what you'd expect from watching martial arts films. So I brought a different angle of looking at action movies, from looking at and getting inspired by watching the Discovery Channel. Sometimes you see programs where they mechanically dissect the physics of the human body. So I knew that was the vision that I wanted to collaborate with in the martial arts choreography, and that vision was brought to our director, Peter Chan. He loved the idea and through this process, images, shots and even editing points were created in my mind before I got into the actual shooting. So during the shooting, [the choreography] was just pure execution and getting the vision that I accumulated in the weeks before I actually got into the production.

FANG: What was your inspiration for your character, Liu? Did you also watch the original ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN for inspiration?

YEN: Not really. Of course, we were aware of THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN, but it was more of the iconic image that we tried to embrace rather than try to remake THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN. In fact, in the beginning, Peter didn't really want to recapture the whole image of the One-Armed Swordsman. He just wanted to do something totally new so that the audience wouldn't think, "Oh, you're just doing a remake of THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN." But toward the end, as we were adjusting our storylines, which is very common in Hong Kong filmmaking, to the part before the finale—and all the time—I was really persistent in trying to influence [Chan] into bringing the One-Armed Swordsman back, because I was thinking it was a cool element to have. Why not bring in that iconic image of the One-Armed Swordsman? It's good for people, too, because it's something to talk about. Simply, it could be very good hype. But it wasn't until we met up right before the final scenes that he realized, "Wait, maybe it IS a good idea to have your arm chopped off!" All along, I was trying to convince him to do this! So that's how it came along. It just so happened that we had Jimmy Wang [in the movie], the original One-Armed Swordsman, so it just sort of worked out. It fit the storyline. It fit the characters. We had the situation where he needed to sacrifice certain things. And the fans loved it. They were like, "Oh! You had the One-Armed Swordsman!" So we had the situation where Liu needed to cut off an arm, so we had the new One-Armed Swordsman against the old One-Armed Swordsman. That was pretty cool.

FANG: What was the working dynamic between you and Peter Chan like?

YEN: Well, I've always been a big fan of Peter. All his films were brilliant films. When we worked on BODYGUARDS AND ASSASSINS, he was the producer. And in the end, we ran into many shooting problems. The movie was going over-budget and the earlier action and drama were not the way he wanted, so toward the end, I actually helped him direct the final scenes, and he loved it. Plus, our relationship in the industry was strong because we've known each other for so long, and he loved KILL ZONE—S.P.L. So our whole relationship led to DRAGON. After BODYGUARDS AND ASSASSINS, we've been looking for the right vehicle to work together again. And having that trust and respect for my action direction, he gave me freedom on the set and basically walked off and did other things [*laughs*]. So I shot those scenes, and it was great. There was a lot of mutual trust. Of course, we talked through the storyline and everything, but it was a really great moment working with him because not only did he give me all the freedom and support, but he also was pushing me to do more by giving me more freedom.