Much like his character in the movie, Dev Patel hit the jackpot when Danny Boyle cast him as the lead of SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE. And the 20-year-old actor is hoping his second feature film, M. Night Shyamalan's THE LAST AIRBENDER, gives him as much good fortune.

Patel plays Prince Zuko, Fire Lord Ozai's oldest son and a skilled firebender who is the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. In an attempt to regain his honor and father's favor, Zuko tries to capture the Avatar.

STARLOG: How did you get this role?

PATEL: I had done an audition for this way back before SLUMDOG was released, and I got myself on tape, and then I got a call from Night saying he wanted me to play a character. I flew straight from the Oscars to Philadelphia, started doing training—lots of hard training, learning Wushu and different martial arts and all that. Yeah, they whipped my butt into shape for this character.

STARLOG: What is Zuko's motivation in this story?

PATEL: Zuko is sent on this mission to go capture a child called the Avatar. The backstory is that he wants to regain his honor for his father. Zuko is just a child looking for love.

STARLOG: Is family one of the film's major themes?

PATEL: Even though it's a fantastical film, some really good messages come through the characters. It's interesting to make [this movie] because you're working with human beings, and you can show more emotion than the cartoon. What holds these characters together and makes each person special is family. The ones where family is strong for them prevail, and the ones who stand alone fail. Zuko is struggling to impress his father, but meanwhile his uncle is trying

to raise him and aide him. But just like life, sometimes you take your anger out on the people you love the most, and he neglects his uncle for a one-track mission to find the boy.

STARLOG: Your character is a firebender. How is that important to the type of person Zuko is?

PATEL: I control fire and can use it to manipulate combat. I like the idea that you can express the way you're feeling by the way you fight. Fire is an element you associate with venom and aggression, and in a nutshell, that's my character. There's a scene where I fight the Avatar, and I'm violent and aggressive, whereas because he's a monk, he's only trying to neutralize me. I find that type of thing very interesting.

STARLOG: How violent are the battle scenes?

PATEL: The action in the film is fast-paced, but I don't think it's gruesome. All of these characters in the film are trained technicians in their art. You're looking at a great firebender and a great airbender. So the way we fight isn't straight brawling; we each have a style. That's what's going to make Zuko a better character, the fact that he's so skilled but his anger makes him flat and weak. It isn't about blood and guts and gore. It's more interesting when you're talking about elements like fire, water, air and earth.

STARLOG: What was your first fight scene like?

PATEL: The first fight scene was on the ship. And everything was on the deep end. I was with eight stuntmen—great, massive stuntmen—and I had to do this scene where I had to look at a picture of my family, and looking at them together and seeing me alone on the ship, it gives me the courage to fight. And so I'm fighting and punching and throwing and suddenly I realized, "Wow, I'm kicking some ass right now!" It was amazing. That was the time where I realized,

“Wow, this is craziness.”

STARLOG: How do you relate to this character? And do you see any of yourself in Zuko?

PATEL: This is a real stretch for me. I went in and thought, “Well, this is going to big a big laugh. I’m playing a cartoon character.” Then I got on set and read the script with M. Night and everyone in front of me, and I found that a lot of soul searching needed to be done, because the character is so different from me as a human being. I try to think of myself as a happy-go-lucky guy who just loves jerking around, and now I’m playing a guy who’s filled with anger and aggression. It’s difficult to keep up that constant energy. Zuko has a lot of learning to do with his skills as a martial artist. And that becomes scary because he’s a boy. He’s a boy who is in charge of a nation, and he’s capable of wielding so much power. It’s really scary. Will he use this power for good or evil? It makes things interesting.

STARLOG: Did you watch the cartoon at all?

PATEL: I watched it when I was filming SLUMDOG in India. I’d come back from the set and it’d be on one of the channels. I tried not to watch too much of it because even though I’m basing it off a cartoon, I wanted to bring myself to it as well. Even though I consider myself a happy-go-lucky guy, I think if you dig deep enough you can find a serial killer, or someone madly in love, or anything really. So I tried to make Zuko as much me as possible.

STARLOG: Shaun Toub plays your Uncle Iroh. What was it like working with him?

PATEL: The first time I met him was at the read through, and I was incredibly sick. He went to the concierge and got some prescriptions from the chemist. He's incredibly nice. The movie is kind of like our relationship: You've got the new kid who's naïve and young, and you've got this nice wise man who's been around the industry who's showing him the ropes.

STARLOG: You've only worked with two directors in feature films, Danny Boyle and Night. Could you compare the two?

PATEL: In my book, you can never compare Danny Boyle to anyone because he opened up the world to me. He employed a boy that he saw from a silly teen drama who was probably unemployable and put him as the lead in his film. For that, I can't really compare directors. The thing about Night is that he's relatively young so he relates to us easily, which is good because we're a pretty young cast. He's really interesting to work with, but I can't compare.

STARLOG: What has it been like going from an unknown to a now-famous young actor starring in a planned epic fantasy trilogy?

PATEL: It still hasn't really struck me. It's strange walking down the street and hearing people recognize me. They call me by my name. The only time I'd get called by my name was when I got sent to the head teacher's office! It's great, and it's so nice to be appreciated. I'm blessed, and I'm doing something I love. The first day I saw SLUMDOG was at the Toronto film festival with a packed crowd, and I saw my performance for the first time, and everyone loved it and gave me a big thumbs up. I've grown up a lot from that, and got a little confidence boost. When you're working on a film set with all these adults, it really makes you mature quickly.

Fame is crazy. I've been thrown into the viewfinder and haven't had a chance to look back. But the people I've been surrounded with have been great role models for me and have really kept me aloft. We were like one big family at the Oscars with Danny and everyone, and now we've got Mr. Marshall—we've got people in the industry who've been doing this for years, and you don't feel alone. I remember coming here on the first day and seeing the ship being built, and I just felt overwhelmed. I never shot on a set before, and I felt like I was engulfed in this massive production. Then I met everyone, and it sort of gave me hope.

The thing I feel most blessed about is seeing the world. Acting has allowed me to see the world.

As a boy I never really had a holiday, I'd never been to Mumbai even, and most of my family is from there. Then I got in this industry, and I've been to Greenland, Mumbai, Toronto—I've been everywhere. On those journeys you meet new people, and as an actor, the only way I can portray characters is by gaining these perspectives to use in a role."

When I was 16, I was very much a kid staying at home with Mom and Dad, and now I'd really love to travel the world, to do the whole backpack thing. I remember I used to do lots of martial arts as a kid, and they used to say that martial arts wasn't a way of fighting, it was a way of life. And I very much equate that to actors: They call us artists, but when I came into the business I was like, "I can't draw. I'm not an artist!" But you slowly realize that everything in life seeps into the craft and helps you become better.

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