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Pulling Punches

By Kasha Van Sant

British Martial Arts talent flexes some serious muscle in the fight to make Asian cinema sit up and take notice



When it comes to Jet Li, no stone should be left unturned. In this case our 'rock' is Silvio Simac whose scene with Jet Li in *Unleashed*; will no doubt be one of the highlights of the film. Simac's interest in fight choreography has its very obvious roots in his martial arts background. Inspired by his favourite Bruce Lee films of the 70s and their hypnotic allure, the rest was inevitable.

"I think martial arts really changed my life for the better, it gave me self esteem and confidence, focus and immense discipline in life." In fact it gave him a fourth Dan in Tae Kwon-do and a third Dan in Kick Boxing, not to mention a host of other disciplines. The love of his sport does not end there though as he explained,

"I have always had this desire to pass this same experience to other people so I took up teaching and I was teaching for nine years. I think media is very powerful because you can use it to send the message out to a much wider audience."

With the execution of movement and action being key to fight choreography, Simac's transition from martial arts to acting therefore seems a natural one. Having worked on *Black Mask II* with the legendary fight choreographer Yuen Woo Ping, it was only a matter of time before he was in the spotlight again.



"I got called up by four different agents to audition for *Unleashed*. The first time I auditioned was in London, the second audition was in Paris. My final audition was again in London so I had to travel back and forth. On the last

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one, Yuen Woo Ping, who choreographed all the action wanted to see me specifically.”

Why?

“He had seen the footage that they had shot prior to auditions. He wasn’t present there, only his stunt team were there so he just wanted to see me for himself. He is a very demanding person. He is a perfectionist and will keep on shooting until he gets exactly what he visualises. You have got to get it spot on.”

Woo Ping is a formidable character who demands respect and definitely taught Silvio Simac the integrals of filming fights scenes, but then again he is not the only heavyweight attached to Unleashed. How did he feel to work with Luc Besson and his team?

“I just felt that it was fantastic I had been given a great opportunity and I feel very lucky. I just want to enjoy the work itself. It was almost like being in the best drama school and being paid for it. It was great fun when I wasn’t working I would stay on set, with the director, watch the screen and try and absorb as much as possible.”

As a blossoming actor this sentiment is hardly out of place but as a sportsman at the pinnacle of his field how did he feel to face Jet Li?

“The first day, my first scene I had to land a flying side kick to Jet Li’s back, they had put a bit of padding on his back. I had worked previously with Jackie Chan and he is very strict, no contact allowed at all. So when they said to me “you’re going to have to kick Jet Li” and I thought, ‘this guy’s a huge star I can’t do that, if I injure him it would be big trouble,’ so I kept pulling my kicks back, I was very nervous. He made it so much easier for me, he just said, “go on kick me,” at one point he jumped on my back and started kissing my neck and he said, “we don’t want to fight we’re friends.””

It seems that Jet Li has made his sense of humour apparent on many occasions. This unique humility has never failed to get the very best out of his edgy counterparts. Simac responds,

“Most of the celebrities I’ve met they are just normal, they have fears and phobias just like you and me so. When I first met Jet I didn’t know what to expect I was actually in the makeup room and it took an hour and a half in makeup. He was sitting next to me with his Buddhist beads. Just meditating for an hour and a half and I realised just how spiritual he is. He’s very calm, he has got this ability to switch on and off very quickly which I found amazing. I had a good laugh with him definitely.

He’s very, very easy to talk to, all this stardom is in peoples’ heads and I think fame is just a by-product of doing your job really well. Having trained in martial arts for so many years a lot of my senior instructors demand respect straight away because of their grade. With my instructor I don’t call him by his first name I call him Master. Jet Li expected me to just call him Jet, not Mr Li. I really liked that, he wasn’t expecting instant respect he’s just a human being.”

Was there anything to learn from Jet?

“How to keep the energy flowing when you are on set.”

How?

“He’s got the ability to focus on what he’s doing and make it real. Whereas some scenes that I had took 5 or 6 minutes to focus on the job I was about to do. He had that ability to clear his mind and focus, I guess that has something to do with his background, martial arts, meditation. You really feel that sense that he is at peace with himself. At one point I said to him what is the favourite film that you have shot so far and I was actually shocked at what he said. He said, “I haven’t got a favourite film it’s just a job.” ”

With this very philosophical stance it is clear that there is much more to Jet Li than meets the eye, it all points to a larger picture which many people have already glimpsed. Simac is no exception.

“I didn’t actually hear this from him but from people on set, that at one point he actually wanted to give up acting. He’s a very dedicated Buddhist and that someone very high up the hierarchy of Buddhism told him to carry on making films and that would spread the Chinese culture and Buddhism. I suppose that is one of his goals aside getting the money for work. I think he’s spreading spirituality through his work. He’s doing a great job of it.”

Unleashed may be seen by Jet Li as a vessel to provide the funds for his personal projects but it seems that Silvio Simac will be advance his career too with the possibility of starring in the new Jet Li film.

“It’s some kind of ultimate fighting championship type of film; where Jet Li is the ultimate fighter so once again they are looking for big guys.”

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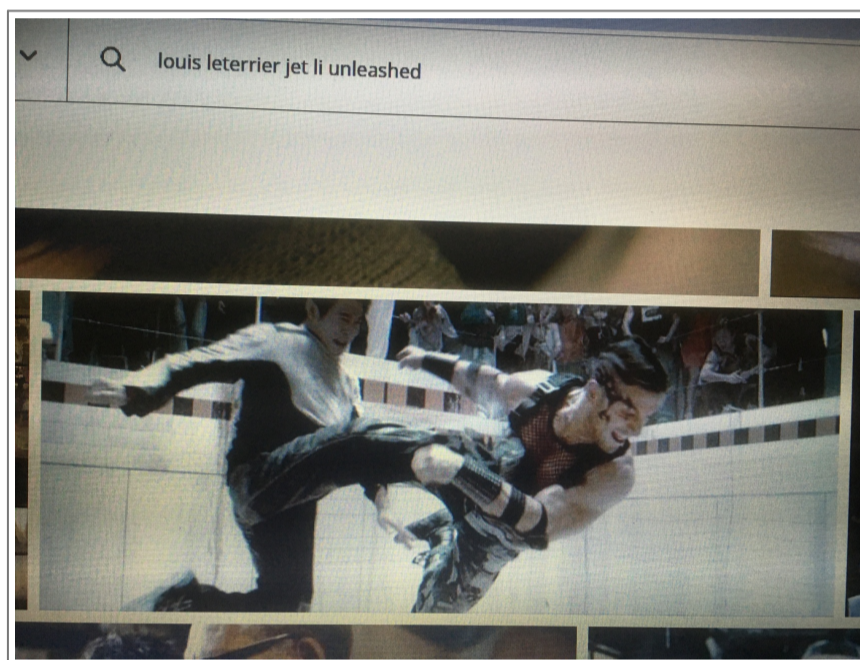
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Silvio Simac has spent most of his life in preparation for competitions, what of the training for the film. How did he prepare?

"I just rehearsed, for six days. Jet Li did not rehearse at all Yuen Woo Ping has an entire team of stunt guys who demonstrate everything that is going to happen. Jet Li has a fantastic ability to pick up whatever they show him and just copy. We rehearsed for days beforehand and he comes and just does it."

Surely that comes with learning?

"It's experience he's been doing it for so many years and also he's got the ability to just focus and pick things up, make it look real. The fight scene with Jet goes on for quite a while seven and a half minutes. I get the opportunity to throw him around I use an axe, sledgehammer, knife hand to hand combat. I think the crew really loved the axe because I am chasing after him with it and sticking it in the walls."



So it was quite comical then?

"I was actually really nervous. The scene is based in a swimming pool with barbed wire all around and Bob Hoskins is standing above on the platform that people jump off, Jet Li is on the floor because he's just been kicked. I have this axe in my hand and I am chasing after him and I am supposed to stick the axe right in the platform. They replaced the rubber axe with the real one. So basically if I hit too high Bob Hoskins loses his feet, if I hit too low and miss it Jet Li gets it. So I said to them, "which one of you is more nervous?" Bob Hoskins says, "me." I had to do this take five or six times and I was glad when it had all finished."

Whilst most people can only ever imagine what it is like to grab the world's leading martial arts star and throw him around, Silvio Simac was getting up close and personal.

"Jet said to me, "you're the first person in the last ten years who has who has thrown me around as much as you have.""

An accolade indeed!

"I pick him up and throw him over to the other side and go and stamp on him, all sorts. He jumps on my back and I try to get him off, bang him against the wall. He's a very small guy. In one scene he does a rugby tackle and just charges towards me, I grab his stomach and throw him over my shoulder but we had to replace him with a stunt double because he dislocated his shoulder. So those scenes Jet Li doesn't get involved with because if he gets injured they can't complete the film."

And complete the film they did, if the French premiere of Unleashed was anything to go by. So it seems our two heroes left unscathed, unless leaving the Glasgow set painted in tattoos and sporting Mohican hairstyles counts towards pain.

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