

Press Release

**James Schamus inspires a packed audience at Qumra revealing how he first got interested in film, his long working relationship with Academy-Award winning filmmaker Ang Lee, his experience as a producer, screenwriter and CEO in independent cinema, and his tips for young screenwriters**

*Moderated by Richard Pēna, the session showed clips from Schamus' films including Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, Ride with the Devil and his short documentary That Film About Money*

**Doha, Qatar – 5 March, 2016:** Award-winning producer James Schamus shared his own journey to becoming a filmmaker at Qumra in a candid, wide ranging, humorous and inspirational master class on Sunday.

The session was the first in a series of five master classes taking place during Qumra's second edition which kicked off March 4<sup>th</sup> in Doha.

Schamus recounted memories of how he first got interested in film growing up in Los Angeles and watching silent movies on a Friday night on television.

"I always had the film bug. I grew up a miserable nerd!," he joked, "watching a public TV show called Friday Nights where I would watch silent movies and watched films like [DW Griffith's film] **Intolerance** at home."

Schamus described first meeting Ang Lee when he co-founded the US production company Good Machine in the early 1990s with Ted Hope, and decided to focus on making 'no budget movies.'

"Ted loves to make lists and he made a list of everyone who had made a short film in the last 10 years but had never made a feature. Ang had made a short whilst at NYU Film School and it was amazing. So we called his agent and were told he was working on some big projects and thanks for the interest but we heard nothing back.

Then two weeks later we got a call out of the blue from Ang saying he'd won a screenplay prize in Taiwan and had \$300,000 to make a feature and he'd heard we were the guys who made movies for no money."

Schamus said Lee then pitched him his first film **Pushing Hands**. "The cool thing was he didn't pitch a movie, he described the movie he'd already shot in his head."

From that first encounter grew a long working collaboration which has spanned 9 movies including **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** which won four Academy Awards and remains the highest-grossing non-English-language in the US.

Discussing some of their movies together – Schamus talked about working on **Eat, Drink, Man Woman** with Lee, which, post his success at the Berlin Film Festival with *Wedding Banquet* was the film that brought worldwide attention to his work.

Schamus described the extensive research they undertook for **Eat, Drink, Man Woman** – a theme that has been constant in his career and harks back to his ‘nerd’ roots. “We did a lot of research into the role of food in family life, what family life in China was like, it was the first crosscultural movie I had written.”

He also talked about the challenge of moving his writing for the first time into a non-American script and translating the script back and forth between Taiwanese, Chinese and English as the writing process continued.

“We also saw the opportunity to use the screwball comedies of the 1940s as a touchpoint for **Eat, Drink, and Woman**, and used this to bring the sparkle back to a family drama.”

Moving on to talk extensively about the mechanics and different disciplines of filmmaking, Schamus spoke about the role of character in film and explained: “A character is really a flow of interaction and relationships and is secondary to action in film where you only have image and words.”

Talking about working with his longtime editor Tim Squyres, Schamus described the close working relationship they developed. “Tim and Ang spend more time in a dark room than most married people,” he joked. “Ang is a director who gets to the editing room before the assistant editor and leaves when the editor is closing down the machine for the night,” he went on to explain.

Discussing the importance of casting directors, Schamus also discussed how much he personally enjoys the casting process when working with first time filmmakers.

“My heart goes out to actors,” he said. “I admire them as they risk more than anybody and they are very vulnerable. They need respect so I always try to give as long and wide a space for emotions to play themselves out and let them know we will catch them if they fall. Casting is 90% of directing.”

Referencing Ang Lee’s use of different cinematographers over his career, Schamus explained that different DOPs are needed for different movies.

“For Ang on Ride With The Devil Fred Elms was alchemy. Ang needed a D.O.P who could run a crew in a specific way. On **Crouching Tiger** we had to cast a DOP as an artist and an onset presence and in a leadership role.”

Speaking about their collaboration on **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** which was screened at Qumra as part of the Masters Screenings, Schamus confided that it had been Ang Lee’s “dream from childhood” to make a martial arts film. “Ang was a fan of the genre, a fan of wire work but he took it to a whole different place,” said Schamus as at that time that genre was driven by Hong Kong chopsocky movies. This reinvented the genre and re-established it as a hybrid-regional cinema which is what it was originally.

“The exciting thing on rewatching the movie is remembering what was going on on the ground – 10-20 people choreographing all the stunts to keep people physically 60ft up trees being controlled on pulleys and rope. What was going on on the ground was the true ballet.”

Schamus went on to speak about his extensive experience in the international film industry heading one of Hollywood’s most successful specialised film divisions at Focus Features - a financier, producer, distributor and sales agent – where he learnt to leverage the Hollywood studio relationship in different ways.

“We were driven primarily by the independent marketplace and we had to have films that would work well in other markets. In my 13 years there, our primary base for production was London and the most important markets for us ranged from France, UK, Scandinavia and Asia depending on the subject matter of the movie, but driven by a flagship release in the US,” he said.

Asked about his recent move into directing – first with the short documentary **That Film About Money** in 2014 and more recently with his feature directorial debut **Indignation**, Schamus said he kind of fell into it after finding himself unemployed from Focus and with some time on his hands as it coincided with his youngest daughter going off to college.

“Directing is a disease that strikes middle age producers,” he joked, “so I knew I was always susceptible, but I’d always had the luxury of writing for Ang Lee so why would I’ve done it before!”

Reflecting on his career, Schamus was asked about his political comments and how his politics are reflected in his professional work.

“I am associated with films that have a progressive tilt,” he said. “Working in the specialised film world you are often working with voices outside of the mainstream and your job is to align the outsiders with the part of the system that can make a profit. It’s about finding audiences for voices that are not part of the mainstream but intersect the mainstream.”

Asked about the key to success in becoming a screenwriter and his advice in overcoming the biggest challenges he has faced as a writer he joked “the biggest problem is getting started!”

Further discussing the role of a screenplay in filmmaking, he added: “Screenplays are a purely instrumental document they are rhetorical documents that are not in and of themselves works for art. My definition of a screenplay is 124 pages of begging for money. You are not writing a sonnet, it doesn’t even have to be particularly elegant, it has to be persuasive.”

During Qumra, Schamus will be mentoring 10 filmmakers whose projects are participating in an intensive development programme including: writer/director Mohamed Al Ibrahim’s crime drama, **Bull Shark** (Qatar, Bahrain, USA); Hamida Issa’s feature documentary **To the Ends of the Earth** (Qatar); director Sherif Elbendary’s feature narrative **Ali, the Goat and Ibrahim** (Egypt, France, Qatar); writer/director Mohanad Hayal’s feature narrative **Death Street** (Iraq, Qatar); and director/screenwriter Karim Moussaoui’s feature narrative drama **Till the Swallows Return** (Algeria, France, Qatar).

Reflecting on his own personal journey to becoming a filmmaker, Suleiman said: “I am still not utterly convinced I am a filmmaker the way I see other filmmakers,” he said. “There is a kind of non-action in my character that defies more of a continuity in terms of making film after film,

writing script after script that I see in other filmmakers. But when I start to write I have satisfaction.”

-ENDS-

**About Qumra:**

Qumra is an initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing and hands-on development for filmmakers from Qatar and around the world, alongside a series of screenings for Doha audiences featuring films by international masters and recipients of support from the Institute.

*\* The Arabic term ‘qumra’ is popularly said to be the origin of the word ‘camera’, and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.*

**About Doha Film Institute:**

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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