

# Woo Tang

Hollywood's hottest star is a director. by Eric Butterman

When director John Woo hit Hollywood via Hong Kong with 1993's *Hard Target*, a mass audience finally witnessed his particular style of kinetic action. It was a moviemaking tone famous around Asia and the rest of the world since 1968, but Woo's relative obscurity in the States only made him work harder. Now, despite a string of box-office hits like *Face/Off* (1997) and *Mission: Impossible II* (2000), his enthusiasm is more suited for a rookie filmmaker than for a maestro with more than 30 films under his belt. Despite his action success, Woo longs to do simple dramatic stories. Lucky for us, he's still blowing things up, as he does in the December release of the Philip K. Dick-inspired *Paycheck*, starring Ben Affleck.

RAMP: So you want to go drama on us? No more action?

Woo: No, I'm enjoying the action, but I hardly get a chance to make character-driven drama like in my Hong Kong days. Action brought me over here, and hopefully the simpler moments in my films will help me get other kinds of movies. I would love to do musicals or Westerns... But I will say I owe a lot of my success to the action of the Spielbergs and Hitchcocks, because those filmmakers helped me grow as a director. *Close Encounters [of the Third Kind]* and *North by Northwest* were wonderful experiences for me.

RAMP: Tell us about your new movie, *Paycheck*.

Woo: It stars Ben Affleck and is as suspenseful as anything I've done. It's a futuristic story about a man who is willing to give up years of his memories to do a job, but after the job is complete, he's forgotten what he did. On his search to remember, he finds some horrifying events that force him into action. This script was so clever that it really kept me challenged as a filmmaker.

RAMP: Nicolas Cage signed on to do his third film with you [*Face/Off* and *Windtalkers*]. Why do you enjoy working with him so much?

Woo: He's incredibly smart and emotional. He has this kind of looniness that I love. Characters in my movies are always like the Lone Ranger, and Cage is like that in real life. He has his own world that he lets you tap into. Also his eyes...I love his eyes! You can tell so much of the story just by how he looks at the camera.

RAMP: How about working with Ben Affleck?

Woo: This kid never cares about where the camera is. He's so natural and unaware that the camera's rolling, that it brings out these amazing moments. You'll get actors who want to know what angle they're being shot at and how it makes them look—Ben doesn't care about close-ups, only about telling the best story.

RAMP: How did you decide you wanted to be a director?

Woo: First I wanted to be an actor—I actually had a speaking problem that acting helped me with. But at 21 I had been so engrossed in the work of French and American filmmakers that I knew going behind the camera would allow me to have the most fun.

RAMP: What draws you to particular material?

Woo: A lot of times it's material that is suited to my knowledge.



Chow Yun-Fat in a scene from the John Woo-directed film *Hard Boiled* (1992).



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*Face/Off* had originally been offered to me 12 years ago, but I turned it down because it was more of a sci-fi version, and I didn't feel I knew enough about filmmaking to do it right. Many years later they sent me a new draft that was more natural, and I also knew more about filmmaking at that point. It's also who is brought in on the project that draws me in. I suggested Travolta because this script had become a human drama, not an action-star piece. When that happened it made me more confident in the material.

RAMP: Did you feel a lot of pressure in doing a sequel to a film as successful as *Mission: Impossible*?

Woo: No, because Tom Cruise told me that he wanted my style. I really wanted a strong love story to go with the action and he came right onboard. Brian De Palma's original was a hard act to follow, but I was so happy with the whole film.

RAMP: *Paycheck* is the fourth major film based on Philip K. Dick stories [the others: *Minority Report* (2002), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Blade Runner* (1982)]. What is it about his work that is so adaptable to the screen?

Woo: There's always a strong message in his work, within the action. In *Paycheck* the message is that it's important to stay in control of technology, because it can cause as many problems as it helps. Here we have a hero who has to destroy some advancing technology because people will lose all hope and power in their future if he doesn't. Another part of Dick's work is how emotional it is. A lot of times science fiction forgets about feelings, and Dick never does. Dick also makes sure to include surprises—that's one of the main reasons people go to the movies.

RAMP: What's up next for you?

Woo: That Nicolas Cage project, *Land of Destiny*. It's about how the Chinese and Irish helped build the railroads, and I think it's one of the more important movies I've done. **R**