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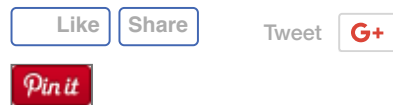


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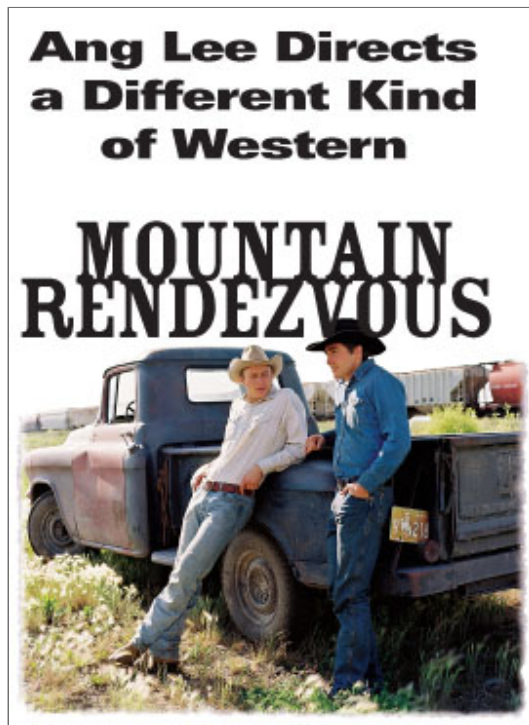
LEE, ANG (12/05)

'Brokeback Mountain' a Different Kind Of Western Romance (12/05)

By Erica Abeel ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Dec 2, 2005



Features



Before bedding down for the night, a cowboy eyes the tiny campfire light of his fellow wrangler across a vast Wyoming mountainscape. The camera moves in on his face, catching the sparks of feelings he doesn't yet recognize. That moment from *Brokeback Mountain* is emblematic of director Ang Lee's gift for telling a story that's at once intimate and grandly epic in scope.

It's a story of doomed love that gains amplitude from its soaring mountain setting (the Canadian Rockies subbing for Wyoming), and poignancy from its punishing social context: the macho, conservative American West of the 1960s and '70s, a place literally murderously hostile to gays (ironically, during the sexual revolution that was transforming much of the country).

Two poor country boys, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), meet while signing up for a summer sheep-herding gig on Brokeback Mountain. The friendship flowers into an intimacy that becomes the transforming event of their lives. Back down from the mountain at summer's end, Ennis marries his sweetheart Alma (Michelle Williams), with whom he'll have two daughters. Jack, in Texas, marries rodeo queen Lureen (Anne Hathaway),

fathers a son, and works in her family's business. But four years later, Ennis and Jack resume their passionate connection, continuing, at escalating risk, to meet over the next 20 years.

Adapted by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana from a short story by Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain* had this year's Toronto Film Festival buzzing, and nabbed the Golden Lion at Venice. With its romantic sweep and charisma-laden stars, the Focus Features December release looks poised to go wider than the art-house circuit (perhaps following the path of Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the most commercially successful foreign-language film ever made). But though TV's "Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" have hit the American mainstream, and the '90s brought the gay comedic films *In and Out* and *The Birdcage*, the question still remains: Will audiences embrace a serious love story about two men?

The Taiwanese-born Lee is no stranger to risk-taking. He changes chameleon-like with each film, tackling genres ranging from family drama (*The Wedding Banquet*), to suburban angst (*The Ice Storm*), to martial arts (*Crouching Tiger*), to comic-book heroes (*The Hulk*). He's uncannily adept at re-jiggering his narrative style to suit the material. "I hope I can live 300 years, and I can try all the [film] genres, and mix them and twist them and learn about them," says Lee in Asian-inflected English. He's a cordial man with a sweet smile and an unassuming manner that must emanate from supreme confidence.

How did he become involved with the "gay western," as it was known around Toronto? While making *The Hulk* three-and-a-half years ago, Lee was introduced by James Schamus (the Focus Features co-president who has written and produced many of Lee's films) to Annie Proulx's *New Yorker* story. "It haunts you. I broke up when I read the ending. Then I read Larry's script, a loyal adaptation, and I jumped. It's a great American love story. People are jaded by love stories, yet this had a freshness. And that world is the real American West. I wanted to put you in an elegiac mood about the West."

Because of its subject matter, though, the film had a seven-year history of not getting made. Various directors came on board, but no actors would commit, nor would studios green-light it. Eventually, Ledger committed to play Ennis without having met or spoken with the director. "When I heard that Ang Lee was going to make it, I thought, 'I have to do this movie,'" Gyllenhaal said. "If a project is not scary and sensitive," says Lee, "then it's probably less interesting to me."

Though initially convinced the film could not be made with a low budget, Lee agreed to shoot in Canada on a budget of \$13 million. "I've never made a movie that wasn't shot on location. I need the nutrition from the place-for *Ice Storm* it couldn't be Darien, it had to be New Canaan." But shooting in Calgary turned out to be a blessing. "You can get a lot of film industry support there and the Canadians are great. All the westerns are shot in Calgary. And the landscape that gives the film its epic quality is free."

In researching the project, Lee brought to it an outsider's fascination and romance with American

folkways. He was raised in a classical Chinese household, studied film at NYU, and stayed on in the States. For *Brokeback*, he was educated in western lore by the "masters," screenwriters McMurtry and Ossana, along with Annie Proulx. "The real West is different from the West of gunslingers," he says. "People are very grudging with words, conservative and hard-working."

On first meeting Proulx, he was intimidated. Then she took him to Wyoming, where he ordered Rocky Mountain Oysters in a restaurant (not realizing they were breaded bull's testicles.) "A lot of protein," he comments, with a mischievous smile. "That broke the ice with Annie."

Lee also studied photographs, including those in Richard Avedon's book *Photographs of the American West*, in order to create the film's many indelible images, such as the first appearance of Ennis Del Mar, standing in a desolate windswept lot before the foreman's trailer, Stetson pulled down over his eyes. "Cowboys are always perfectly posed, and the frame is a little off-center," Lee observes. "Plus there's that big sky, and, as Larry says, 'always the damn wind.'"

Every actor in the film seems to have pulled out his finest work for Lee. Ledger, in particular, conveys the bottled-up Ennis with such heartbreaking veracity, his performance may become the stuff of Hollywood legend. Says Lee, "Heath carries the movie. Because Ennis is so repressed, the audience tries to act for him. He's a great western character." In the press notes, the cast, crew and writers credit Lee not only with striking just the right balance between the intense, intimate aspect of the journey and the epic sweep, but also monitoring each detail, including the actors' Wyoming accents, not to be confused with Texan.

During the rehearsal period, "boot camp" was set up in California, and the two stars given "ranch-hand chores." Ledger had ridden horseback since childhood, but his co-star needed to become an instant wrangler, and worked up a few blisters from chopping wood and building fences. "Heath went to camp too," says Lee. "He and Jake needed to feel comfortable and find a chemistry. We also worked on the actors' body language and postures, how they carry themselves-until we can taste the character and the West."

Lee excels in this film at conveying the unspoken, the lost opportunity. "The most powerful thing in the movie is about what is missing," he says. With exquisite indirection, he charts the growth of mutual attraction between the two men before they realize or can even articulate it. (Ennis would not even have the word "gay" in his vocabulary, Lee points out.) When Ennis bathes in blurred focus in the background, he registers on the silent foregrounded Jack; Lee uses every inch of the screen to tell the story. And in the third act, when Lureen recites the official version of Jack's fate, Ennis reads between the lines all too well (a scene that's remarkably faithful to the equivalent sentences in Proulx's story).

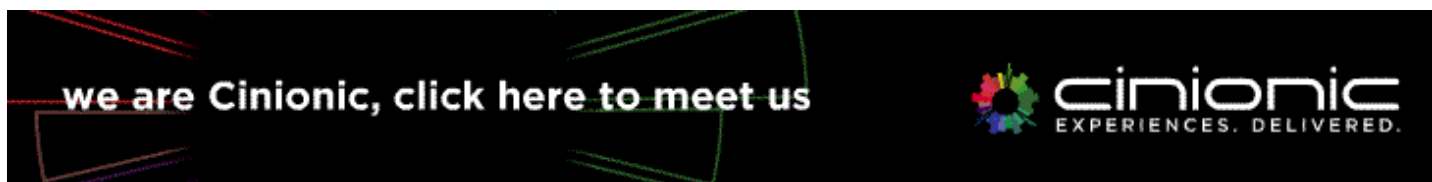
Considering the film's two leads are macho guys with impeccable hetero credentials, how did they make the love scenes so convincing? "On shooting days, the actors just set themselves in a zone and you just roll the camera," says Lee. "The first love-making scene in the tent is out of the blue, all

confusion and animal. It was just one shot, handheld, highly choreographed. The explicit is not important. What matters is that it be believable. The sex is important for the movie, and should be exciting. But more would exploit the actors-though they would have done more." A greater hurdle involved aging the actors over a 20-year period. "It's reflected in how they carry themselves and talk, deepening voices, facial hair and subtle lines on their faces." That the film was shot out of sequence further challenged the actors.

"I like every film to be a learning experience," Lee has said. So what did he take from *Brokeback Mountain*? "I'd never filmed a love story as a genre. I learned about westerns. Gay issues and sexuality. And with every movie I learn how people respond to me. I also learned about treating time. That's the hardest thing to grasp in filmmaking." Despite the ever-widening spectrum, though, there's a continuity to Lee's work. "My main theme," says the director, "is the innocent heart. It's in all my movies."

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