

Toronto International Film Festival 2004

Interview with Jia Zhang-ke, director of *The World*

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhang-ke in Toronto through an interpreter.

David Walsh: I understand this film was made through official channels, with government approval. Why did you decide to take this route?

Jia Zhang-ke: With the political changes taking place, there is more freedom of speech. For more than a decade, filmmakers in China have talked about this, argued for this in the media and tried to negotiate with the censors, and this is the result.

DW: Is it possible to be just as critical as before while taking this route?

JZ: Things went well, because we had permission. The concern is there, the worry is there, but we did not get anything cut out of the film after the censors viewed it. But there's also the concern as to whether I will change as an individual, so ...

DW: Do you feel a pressure?

JZ: A lot of pressure.

DW: From the government, or the world film industry? Or both?

JZ: Mostly the pressure from the government. There are two things that we need to keep in mind. First, to create a good film, that people enjoy, and, second, to try and transform the general situation, to create more freedom of speech for filmmakers and the population.

DW: You're something of a celebrity in the film world, I meant that pressure as well.

JZ: There's not too much pressure in that. Filmmaking is a relaxing activity; I don't care what other people think about the films.

DW: Will this film be shown in China and what do you think the reaction will be?

JZ: It will be released in November, and this will my

first film shown in seven years. It will be shown in Beijing, Shanghai and Canton. I'm quite nervous about it, also quite excited.

DW: Do films like this get a big audience?

JZ: I don't know, we'll see. There's not a very good system in terms of promotion and distribution. Young directors have limited resources with which to promote their films.

DW: Your films are composed of small dramatic units. What is the relationship between these small units and the overall effect you want to create?

JZ: I feel like I learn the world in small episodes, bits and pieces of life. This is a new narrative method for me to connect everyone together in this film, similar to the way you use a computer—you click here, you click there, each time leading you to another location. This is how the world and its experiences are connected to one another. These small episodes create the big picture, or that's the intention.

Also, in China now society has so many different levels, new levels, and people fit into these different levels, that's why we tried to create stories about these different strata that would connect with each other, to create a single, whole image. It's a complicated country.

DW: In this film and others you treat workers who die in accidents or face very bad conditions—the construction worker in this film, a coal miner in another. Are these bad conditions and deaths an issue that particularly concern you?

JZ: Very much so. The modernization in China brings a great many people from the provinces to work in the big cities. They sacrifice their lives in the service of this “modernization” in the great cities, which benefits

other people. This is why this concerns me.

DW: Your work is very austere, very understated, but in the films there are often musical numbers, theatrical numbers. Are you aware of a tension in your film between this austerity and a desire for something more spectacular, more theatrical?

JZ: The musical part of this film, and the theatrical, is a symbol of people escaping from their real lives. Also, a lot of young people in China don't know how to express their emotions, so by creating this artistic-theatrical environment, this mask, they can express themselves more openly. Even though every day they do the same routines at this park, the same dances, it's an escape for them.

DW: The "world" in the film, a theme park, is a false world, an imitation world. Do you mean to suggest that Chinese people are fooled or fool themselves into living in a false world?

JZ: Yes, it's a fabricated world with which I'm trying to say something about China. "Modernization" and globalization have arrived in China, but the country seems modern only from the outside. There are many problems in China right now, including how the Chinese deal with themselves. There are many problems concerning freedom of speech. It may look very cosmopolitan, but it's not.

DW: China is a major source of cheap labor for many companies all over the world. What is your attitude toward globalized capitalism?

JZ: Major companies, especially from the US and other big countries, are benefiting from these low-paid workers, and also Chinese companies too. So these workers are the victims of this globalization. So before the country becomes wealthy again, there's a stage in which a lot of people are going to sacrifice, but the business people don't care about this. They don't care at all.

So the government should intervene and defend people. Because these workers work the longest hours, the most dangerous jobs and get the lowest wages. Some of these workers work 18 hours a day. Like the conditions of another century.

DW: Are there protests, strikes, opposition?

JZ: No, everybody is silent about this. That's why we make films about it. It's one of ways we can express ourselves about this problem.

DW: What is your opinion of the US war against

Iraq?

JZ: I don't like war at all.

DW: How can Chinese filmmakers continue to make progress?

JZ: Freedom of speech is the most important thing today, not be scared by the rules and regulations of the government, and not to be too concerned by what audiences will think, but to do your own work. To be more independent.

DW: Are you optimistic about Chinese cinema?

JZ: Right now I'm optimistic about the situation. But there are so many ups and downs in China, so that one never knows how it will turn out.

DW: Are there others of your generation whose work you admire?

JZ: Yes, more and more young directors, doing independent work, on digital video, documentary films. Inexpensive films.

DW: Are these films seen by people?

JZ: Yes, people watch these films in many ways. Universities show them. Cinema clubs show them, fan clubs watch them. But still it's a very small portion of the potential audience.



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