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HEADLINE: Beineix's back!

SUBHEADLINE: Reinvigorated after a lengthy 'forced retirement', the French film director talks of current and future projects and the need for works of art which counterbalance economic and cultural standardisation

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Touring the world to promote *Mortal Transfer*, his first full-length film in eight years, Jean Jacques Beineix was in town recently to introduce a screening at the Bangkok Film Festival of this darkly humorous, psychological thriller. We put a few questions to the man responsible for such enduring cult favourites as *Diva* and *Betty Blue*, both of which were included on *Variety* magazine's list of the best foreign films of the last 20 years.

* This is your first encounter with Thailand. What are your initial impressions?

In comparison with other parts of Asia ... I am familiar with Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul and especially Japan, which I know particularly well ... I am stunned by the recurrence and strength of contrasts in Thailand. Luxury, flagrant wealth contrasts with poverty, an age-old culture cohabits with what we could call Westernisation, etc. It is somehow very Latin ... very different from Japan.

People take great care of you; they are very delicate, smiling and lively. Besides that there are some characteristics common to other Asian nations such as a cult of gestures. It is surprising how sensual this country is.

* With *Mortal Transfer*, you are making a comeback after eight years of silence. What kept you away from the big screen for so long?

There are two ways to answer this question _ I'll go for the short answer. It had to do with a lack of desire to make feature films and the fact that none of the topics I had in mind were actually interesting enough to be

turned into movies. It also must have been related to a particular era during which we witnessed an invasion of commercial movies, poles apart from the idea I personally have of authentic cinema. I felt a stranger to this trend and therefore aspired to find new sources of inspiration.

Thus in this forced retirement of mine, I completed several documentary films in countries such as Japan and Romania, which filled my need to meet people _ something I especially enjoy. Actually I would have done more films like that if the bureaucracy in the background _which decides what is worth making for TV channels _ had not been so heavy.

Making short films is something I could do till the end of my days _ with fun and pleasure, although there is a couple of long-length films I still have in mind. In the meantime, I have also turned my attention to other types of art such as painting, music, etc. These have brought me back to cinema, the [so-called] seventh art, with a different approach ... more secure, less concerned about the ultimate result.

* How was your approach when making *Mortal Transfer* different from that which you took in your previous work?

The first and foremost difference is that I am eight years older now! There are many differences but it is hard to explain them ... I have made all my films with the same passion and pleasure, encountering roughly the same difficulties.

This particular film has a heavier dose of psychology _ that's for sure. My intention was to make a comedy _ a dark comedy, that is. At first when it was launched in France, people didn't much understand the mixture of genres the film was dealing with, so I had doubts about it myself too. But now, seeing the success it has had in America and, so far, in Asia [Hong Kong, Korea], I feel more at ease, more confident. Yet question marks remain about the rest of Asia _ I have no clue at all whether people will like it or not ... due to cultural differences. The matters discussed in this movie are indeed somehow more Western and Judaic-Christian as a whole.

* Your movies are usually very introspective, looking very closely into the complexities of the human thought processes. Are memories of the time you spent studying medicine resurfacing?

(Beneix previously revealed that he once had ambitions to become a psychiatrist. The leading character in *Mortal Transfer* is a middle-aged psychiatrist incapacitated by his own unresolved Freudian issues.)

I take that as a compliment! To be able to dig deep into human nature, psychology, perceptions and thoughts _ everything which belongs to an inner world _ these revelations are a few of the possibilities offered to the seventh art. This very reality makes me state that cinema is not only about telling stories. There are many other dimensions in addition: The style, the relationship developed with the public, the guess you make in regard to their expectations, etc. Whereas there are fat and arrogant people who keep telling you that ``a good story is a good story; it is self-sufficient no matter how good or bad the artist is.'' But I think that a good story, well told, becomes a piece of art.

* In your opinion, what niche has Asia carved out for itself on the global entertainment scene?

Asia holds an increasingly important position. Although the Asian movie industry has always been around, at the moment it is making a very strong re-appearance ... first Taiwan and Hong Kong, later, Korea and tomorrow perhaps, Thailand. As for the Thai cinema, I am especially aware of two movies: *Fah Talai Jone*, which I saw recently in Seattle [and which will soon be released in France and the US]; and *Moon Hunter*, October 14, which I would love to see. The former had a very avant-garde construction with an interesting mixture of genres.

* You have an ongoing project with a Hollywood studio. How much can you say about this particular plan?

It is still too early to talk about this project yet. But what I can say for certain now is that I am very happy about the topic of the film _ which will revolve around women _ and that the lead role will be taken by a famous

American actress. She's in the 30-to-40 age group, although with make-up one can accomplish miracles!

I don't mean to paraphrase a certain French poet who once wrote that ``women are the future of men'', but I think he was probably right. From Afghanistan to Asia as a whole, I believe the fight for gender equality is an extremely important one. Making a movie in Hollywood is more than making just another movie; it's an exciting challenge ...

* So what sparked your desire to make a movie with a Hollywood studio?

For the past 20 years or so, I'd always refused to do so because none of the scripts given to me sounded interesting enough. I must say I have turned down quite a few films _ from upcoming Alien 4 to Less Than Zero. I have the impression that they don't make films the way I do, which might be the same difference as that between an artistic approach and an industrial one. Perhaps my refusal so far was also linked with a lack of confidence in my ability to resist the pressures of the system ...

Over the past two decades, no one in Hollywood has ever asked me this most simple, basic question: ``What do you want to do next?'' Or they'd look at you, pretending that they were listening very attentively and end up asking some secretary to forward you a scenario about something poles apart from your personal interests. Now, for the first time, I happen to have been offered a project which suits me. But I can't tell you more about it. I will be taking a risk, with no prior expectations whatsoever. As usual, I will make my film the way I want to do it and in the best manner I possibly can.

* You are among the few French film directors to have crossed national frontiers and secured a global audience for your movies. What advice would you give to the many Thai directors struggling to go international?

One thing is sure: There is no recipe for success, otherwise directors would have followed it long before now. I don't feel in a position to give any advice either. The only thing I can say is: Travel as much as possible; meet

people; and be patient ... I am confident that more opportunities will crop up for local directors to reach an international audience simply because the world is increasingly global ... information is circulating at an unprecedented speed. It is much easier than it used to be in the past. Besides, Asia is now being revealed to the eyes of Westerners; so the time is ripe. Directors have to be daring and enterprising.

* In these days of the new world order _ disorder, some would say _ is there really much room for the fight to preserve local cultures?

More than ever. Considering the threat posed by a global economic order, regional identities are more and more indispensable. Artists, and the creative world in general, are particularly adapted to individual expression. There is an increasing need for opinions and works of art to counterbalance standardisation. Art is not as frivolous as some leaders may think. They'd better beware: Artistic creation is a fundamental right _ one cannot deprive people of this basic freedom. Take the example of the Taliban. They wanted to destroy the statues of Buddha, the result is that they are now being rebuilt.

There's always a great temptation to subjugate art [to other concerns] ... but hopefully human nature has a lot of resistance ...