

PO AND THE GRASSHOPPER

“BE LIKE STILL WATER,” THE MASTER TAUGHT. “YOU LOOK INTO IT AND SEE YOURSELF...”

by PAULINE ROGERS

The much beloved 1972 television series, *Kung Fu*, lensed by Guild cinematographer Richard L. Rawlings, ASC and produced and directed by Jerry Thorpe, told the story of Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine), aka “grasshopper”, a Chinese-American outcast trying to navigate the quagmire of life in the American West of the 1870s. This former Shaolin monk (and martial arts expert) encounters an amoral and lawless land. His only comforts are recollections (in flashback style) of the wisdom and support of his teacher, Master Po (Keye Luke), whose murder was avenged by Caine, thus forcing his escape across the seas. Through violence, heartache, joy, and redemption “the grasshopper” travels, always calling on the ancient and time-honored mentor/student relationship that was so valued in his native land.

A kitschy pop philosophy and daring counter-culture film aesthetic made *Kung Fu* an instant cult classic. And its core relationship still resonates as a model of generational values

and education. In fact, nowhere is that teaching model better exemplified than in the movie and television industry, where seasoned artisans delight in passing on their wisdom to a new generation. Like Po with Caine, the bonds they share are special and the life lessons priceless. And, thankfully, with each new grasshopper coming up, there is always a Po around to help navigate the pitfalls and peculiarities of our unique industry.

That’s why, for our Generation NEXT issue, we found three distinct “Po and the grasshopper” relationships among the members of Local 600. Award-winning shooters like Mauro Fiore ASC, Ellen Kuras ASC and Phedon Papamichael ASC all have found something special in their three young charges - Michael Nie, Alison Kelly and Tari Segal - and chose to share their knowledge. Their generosity has built a foundation for this trio of up-and-coming Caines, wandering through a confusing and often brutal American landscape; yet fostered by a bond that goes beyond the walls of a movie set.



photo courtesy of Michael Nie

MAURO FIORE, ASC AND MICHAEL NIE

All cinematographer Mauro Fiore, ASC wanted from the “new kid” on *The Island* was someone to create and manage reference photographs to be used for color timing dailies. Then he got a look at gaffer Mike Bauman’s choice of help.

“The first thing I noticed was someone who wanted to try hard, was putting in the effort, and was enthusiastic,” recalls Fiore of this year’s ECA Award winner Michael Nie. “Like me, he didn’t come from the entertainment business, but he wanted to be a part of this creative world.” It was an eagerness to learn, not desperation, that showed in the young filmmaker-to-be, fresh from Wisconsin and determined.

“I was green and I was hungry,” admits Nie. “Mauro was willing to look past some of my rough edges and appreciate my somewhat unbridled desire to learn.”

And learn Nie did. Not just about Fiore’s art, but about himself and life on a set. “I remember, early on, I was pressed for time and handed Mauro a reference photo that was not all that good,” Nie recalls. “Mauro looked at it, handed it back to me, and simply said, ‘Mike, you are better than this.’ That’s all. It was one of those teaching moments.

“In a short sentence, he taught me three things: You can be kind and still make your point. You must maintain the highest of standards. And you need to trust and believe in the ability of someone to meet those high standards. There was a lot packed into that simple sentence. Mauro was being a good teacher and I was doing my best to be a good student.”

“It was important for Mike to understand how important respect is, for the people you work with and for yourself,” Fiore adds. “Sure, I could teach him technique, and that’s important. But each cinematographer will develop his own style. What’s really important is to believe and stand up for yourself when you know you are right.”

Nie says Fiore is a class act. “Mauro is technologically savvy, extremely talented, and politically smart,” he begins. “At the same time, Mauro is a family man, an excellent cook, and a great guy to kick the [soccer] ball around with. He helped me understand the importance of striking the right balance in life.

“I’ve witnessed Mauro working in high-pressure environments with some very intense directors,” Nie adds. “No matter how chaotic or difficult a situation gets, he has mastered the ability to take it all in stride. This is a quality I strive to emulate.”

Nie cites a recent project he was shooting where two main creatives did not see eye-to-eye. “The choreographer wanted to see everything proscenium and the director wanted to get in there. I was caught in the crossfire,” Nie relates. “I thought about how Mauro would respond and found a way to massage the situation, keeping the crew and production moving forward.”

Fiore and Nie remain close. They play soccer together. They exchange ideas. And, as Fiore describes it, they still share that special mentor/student relationship. “We talk about everything from new lights and cameras to discussing labs. Just because we aren’t on a project together, doesn’t mean we can’t keep that relationship going.”

The “grasshopper” absorbed another key lesson: always pay it forward.

“I understand the value of being afforded your first professional opportunities,” Nie concludes. “I am consciously making an effort to bring several current and past students I’ve encountered from Chapman University into the fold. In fact, if there is a project that I cannot do, I pass it along to someone I trust, the way Mauro trusted me.”