

INTERVIEW

MARK STRANGE IS FAST BECOMING ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY REGARDED ACTION STARS IN BRITISH FILM, WITH A GROWING PORTFOLIO OF IMPRESSIVE WORK TO HIS NAME. IN ADDITION TO HIS YEARS SPENT IN FILMMAKING, MARK'S FIGHTING EXPERIENCE SPANS OVER TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AND TRACES A GENUINE PASSION FOR THE MARTIAL ARTS BACK THROUGH HIS CHILDHOOD.

MARK STRANGE

Growing up in Leyland, Lancashire, young Mark was inspired by witnessing the magnificent martial artistry of Jackie Chan, which started an unwavering love for martial arts and action cinema. So impressed was he by the physical displays on screen that he signed up for Lau Gar martial arts at his local leisure centre. Showing great talent in his training, the inspiration he drew from watching his idols perform on screen - coupled with a dream of making his own movies - motivated him to achieve his goals in a competitive fighting career that lasted an impressive sixteen years (his first appearance in *MAI* was Vol 4, No.1 at age seventeen).

As a teen, Mark opened his very own gym teaching Chinese martial arts to students while developing his own training. Dividing his time, he was able to run the gym for an impressive fourteen years while building his name and fighting reputation. During these years, Mark competed internationally and even travelled to China with his instructor, Master Derek Frearson (founder of the British Taijiquan and Shaolin Wushu Association), where he lived among the Shaolin Monks

and embarked on full days of grueling drills in both armed and unarmed combat. Through years of intense physical training, Mark's universal love for martial arts saw him master many disciplines, including Tai Chi, Wing Chun and Seven Stars Praying Mantis. Yet the transition to film remained a consistent goal.

The dream soon became a reality when Mark was invited to Hong Kong where he would work alongside lifelong heroes Jackie Chan and Donnie Yen. Despite being a new arrival in Hong Kong, Mark's experience in martial arts was put to good use and ensured he impressed the local film-making talent. He even went on to appear in *Batman Begins*, honing his skills further working on a grand scale Hollywood production. It wasn't

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long before he impressed the international film community with his completed feature debut, *Displaced*, which became an international success with distribution acquired all over the world. In the next stage of his career, Mark played one of the leads in Chee Keong Cheung's tournament movie, *Underground*. The film was a critical success and propelled Mark into the spotlight with his chillingly brutal yet sympathetic portrayal of a fighter known simply as 'the homeless'. Shortly after, he co-starred in Chee's second film, *Bodyguard: A New Beginning*, a gritty action/drama shot between Hong Kong and the UK. Celebrating the recent releases of *Underground* and *Bodyguard* on DVD nationwide in the UK, it seemed a good opportunity to catch up with Mark and reflect on his incredible journey so far...



A SCENE FROM UNDERGROUND

MAI: Mark, tell us how old you were when you started studying martial arts and what drew you to begin training?

Mark: When I first started martial arts I was ten years old and influenced by watching martial arts movies like the early Jackie Chan films, Bruce Lee and even Hollywood stars like Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*. These films made me want to go out there and study martial arts, so I went out and found a club that taught Lau Gar, which was the first style I studied. I really wanted to learn Kung Fu more than anything, to emulate my on screen heroes, and at the time Lau Gar gave me a great base of Chinese Kung Fu and Kickboxing...

Were you a natural athlete?

Not really, I was active, but a really skinny kid - I wasn't very strong or athletic before my training. But I had a great first teacher, Steve Cavanaugh, who himself



was taught by Chris Boughey, head of the North West Lau Gar Schools. Steve taught a good balance of traditional martial arts and modern Kickboxing. He was an exceptional kicker, which I really admired and so it was really cool to get a strong foundation with the leg work. Steve pushed me hard - really mentored me and built my confidence.

What made you decide to take your skills into the ring to compete?

I took part in my first competition when I was around twelve years old. I only did grades at first and it was all good experience. I kept going out there and once you do the first, you tend to get the bug to do another. I was on the circuit from twelve years old to about twenty-eight. In the beginning, it was forms and weapons competitions - later, I went into semi-contact and eventually full-contact, where I entered some of the Sanshou tournaments. They were really tough! I wanted the experience of testing out my skills in competition. I wanted to become the best all round martial artist that I could be. I loved the traditional aspect with the weapons and forms, and I enjoyed testing my skills against opponents in the semi and full-contact competitions as well.

Are there any fights that stand out for you?

It's quite funny actually, Nathan Lewis, one of the actors in *Underground* and a good friend of mine, always tells the story of the fight which gained me a lot of respect when I was sixteen years old. I fought Pele Reid who, at the time, was *the force* on the tournament circuit. This guy was around 6'4" or 6'5" and I was only 16 years old, 5'10" and probably 10 stone less! But I got a lot of respect by being booted and then getting up and carrying on, having the heart to keep going against a bigger opponent with, literally, no chance of beating him. For me, what stands out are some of the Sanshou tournaments I competed in. I entered the British Chinese Martial Arts Championship at the Leasowe Sports Centre in Liverpool, which was a really tough tournament that used eliminations; you'd fight one match with three two-minute rounds, then go on to the next. You'd be fighting full-contact pretty much all day until you got to the final.

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“As an actor, you get so used to missing and not injuring the other person - then being put into that ring, fighting full contact and properly whacking each other was a weird transition.”

You’ve talked about training and fighting professionally as being ‘character building’.

I used to travel all over doing competitions and it was a good way of getting yourself known in the martial arts world. It was also about meeting other great martial artists and, back in those days, it really did build your character. Semi-contact point fighting used to be, literally, full contact. If you got hit, you were hurt! The winning and losing process is also a great character building experience; you either curl up and die or it makes you stronger and more determined to succeed.

What was it like competing on an international level?

I won many titles in this country, like the FSK and the MAI events in forms and weapons. When I fought in the British Chinese Martial Arts Championships in Liverpool, I was a homegrown Champion and from that I was able to go over and compete in China. It was a fantastic honour and privilege competing for Great Britain.

You ran your own gym where you also worked as an instructor. How important was the teaching process for you?

I was probably one of the youngest people to own a gym in this country at that time. At 16 or 17, running a full time gym was very hard - owning a business and paying the bills! As a coach you have to know every

element of the system inside out, and by actually teaching the skills to others, it helped me to understand and appreciate everything on a much higher level. I was also training students to compete and take care of themselves, and increase their confidence as well. I decided to close when I was invited to go and work in Hong Kong. My ultimate goal was always to work in film and take that next step in the industry, but I had some great times as a teacher. Whenever I have the opportunity, I still teach close friends, so teaching is something that will hopefully always be a part of my life.

Tell us about your acting background.

Something I really worked at alongside my martial arts was the drama, I really wanted to balance the two elements. I’ve always wanted to be in front of the camera, to begin with, I wanted to do theatre work more than film... Once I started making films, the desire to do theatre just went. I like the experience of the live performance - it reminds me of tournaments, things can blow up in your face and you don’t get the luxury of doing another take!

You recently competed in a *Pain and Glory* fight. How did this come about?

Chee [Keong Cheung] called me as we’d been invited to go and watch the UFC at the o2 Arena in London. We watched the event and I met a fight promoter, Joe Long from Fighters Inc. They were organising a *Pain and Glory* event in association with our film,

Underground. We were talking and he said; “Mark, I understand you’re an actor now but you used to fight. Would you be interested in fighting again?” [Laughs.] I hadn’t fought for a good ten years, so I went away and thought about it but decided it would be a bit of fun and it would help promote the film. I agreed to fight and had a couple of months to train. I went down to a gym in Bournemouth and fought a couple of pretty good guys down there to see if I still had the heart. When the time came, I didn’t have a clue about the guy I was fighting - I didn’t research him at all. My philosophy has always been to concentrate on my own training and not look into my opponent. A lot of fights can be won or lost in your head before you even step into the ring. If I researched my opponent and found out that he was seven foot tall and had never

lost a fight, then that could wear me down mentally. I much prefer to go into the ring with no expectations and deal with the situation and my opponent in the moment. During the fight I landed a few great kicks - I caught him with a head kick and spinning kick right across his chin straight away. In my training, I wanted to build up my cardio to the point where I was like a machine - I can keep going and keep striking and have constant fuel in the tank. With the whole timing and distance thing as an actor, you get so used to missing and not injuring the other person - then being put into that ring, fighting full contact and properly whacking each other was a weird transition. My opponent, Keith Adams, was a really good guy and a solid, tough fighter. I wish we’d had more time because we only did three rounds. It was a great experience...





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WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL AND SCREEN FIGHTING?

Real fighting on the street is dirty, it's gritty and normally over in seconds. Competition fighting can be beautiful to watch if you get two great technicians. For screen fighting, I like making things look as pretty as possible, but I do like the gritty stuff too. Good screen fighting is being able to sell what you're doing, make it look as realistic as possible, but still make it look pretty in a sense. When you get someone putting 100% into a strike and 100% into selling the technique, with the opponent doing the same it's just fantastic. I've also learnt that the narrative of the fight is as important as the choreography - every action sequence needs to develop the characters and take the audience on a journey.

MESSING AROUND BEHIND THE SCENES OF BODYGUARD



Was training for that fight different from your days competing?

I focused heavily on sparring, pad work, punching and kicking drills, stretching and a lot of bodyweight exercises. This time around I did everything I used to do, with the addition of 'caveman' training. This is a method that a lot of the UFC fighters use. It's basically circuit training using a mix of strength and conditioning exercises. I had a great gym in Chorley called Powerbeck with a lot of facilities. I picked ten exercises including jumping, pull-ups, medicine ball sit ups and elastic resistance training and then spent 30 seconds to a minute on each exercise before moving onto the next. After the circuit, I would rest for a couple of minutes then start it again. Each training session I would add an extra circuit. It was great for building my overall strength and cardio - it was very hard work - I remember the first time I did it, I was sick!

There is even a documentary about you being made (titled *Mark Strange: The Road to Pain and Glory*)...

The documentary is literally about my uphill struggle to get in ring shape. Being in shape for the movies is about looking good. For a fight, it's about making sure you can go the distance - it's a totally different concept. The film shows me having good and bad days, following my journey to the fight - even in the changing room - the camera follows me everywhere.

It was very *Rocky Balboa* in the sense of getting in the ring again with people thinking 'Can Mark still take a punch?' There was probably a lot of doubt in people's minds and doubt in my mind too. It takes a lot of heart getting back in the ring.

What was it like working in Hong Kong?

The first time I travelled there was to work on *The Twins Effect*. The film actually got postponed and shot a month later but I was invited to work on *The Medallion* in the mean time. The first night I was called over by the producer, Bey Logan, and I saw Jackie Chan! About a week later we were in a sewer in Hong Kong. He was so great to work with - I remember a scene where I had to throw myself into a wall and I thought 'Right, I'm really going for this.' I ended up smashing my chin and he asked 'Are you ok?' and I just said 'Yeah, fine!'

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When there's that level of respect, you're willing to go for it.

Tell us about *Batman Begins*...

Batman is really where I pooled a lot of the talent to work on *Underground* and met some old friends from the tournament days. Even though what I did wasn't very challenging, *Batman Begins* was a great opportunity to be there and just soak in a huge budget Hollywood film and see how those guys do it. It became a recruitment ground for talent, and there was a lot of skilled martial artists there not being used. So I saw this gap and thought 'I want to use these guys' and that became *Underground*. It was great working with Dave Forman, who was the fight coordinator on *Batman Begins*. Dave likes to tell stories within the fight - he doesn't want people fighting without purpose. We tried to bring that to *Underground*.

How did you first meet Chee Keong Cheung and begin working with him?

I was introduced to Chee while making *Displaced*, through a friend of mine called Andrew Patrick who used to be the Chief Executive of the British Film Commission. He brought us together and saw Chee had that element that I needed to get my first film, *Displaced*, finished and out into the marketplace. I met with Chee and was pretty impressed with his experience and knowledge of the industry. So, along with the director, Martin Holland, we flew out to LA and Chee helped us secure a sales agent and get it into the market. It was on the plane back from LA that we came up with the idea of a UK martial arts movie, which became *Underground*. It was the birth of a new team.

Underground and *Bodyguard* have a unique style. What are your thoughts on Chee's approach as a director?

Underground was very hard work but I think what really helped make the film was the team. Everybody really wanted to give 110%. It obviously brought the best out in Chee - I think he's a fantastic director who works so well with the actors.

[Laughs] Actually it was really mad because a lot of the time Chee wouldn't tell the actors who was going to win, so the choreography was moulded at the last minute. It was good because it kept everybody on their toes. He'd always push you to that next level and gets the best performance from you. He's got a great eye for shots and capturing action and imagery. I really look forward to our next project together.

For martial arts and action cinema fans who've not yet seen these films, what can they expect?

For the budget we had on both films, we pulled off something pretty unique. *Underground* is a brutal tournament film, where twelve fighters compete in a bare knuckle, no-holds barred competition. The fight scenes were done with no wires, or

UNDERGROUND AND BODYGUARD: A NEW BEGINNING ARE BOTH AVAILABLE IN THE UK ON SPECIAL EDITION DVD, ONLINE AND IN THE HIGHSTREET.

special effects - just raw talent. *Bodyguard: A New Beginning*, was our first international film, shooting in both London and Hong Kong. We wanted to keep that same gritty edge with the action, but with a Hong Kong twist. Again, we had a great team on board with the martial arts talent, as well as some pretty well known actors. We created some really beautiful action and there's a very real feel to both films.

So what's next for you, Mark?

After *Pain and Glory*, there's al-

ways that thought of whether I'd like to get back in the ring again, but I love acting and being in front of the camera, that's my world now. We've got the *Pain and Glory* documentary released later this year. I am also currently taking part in a series of signings with Chee around the UK to promote the release of both films. We've got a couple of action projects we're developing at the moment with a bigger production value than before. I look forward to raising the bar!

MIKE FURY

For more information on Mark Strange visit his official website at www.mark-strange.net and his official sponsor www.fightshop.com.

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