

## A Banquet of Inclusion

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN



Mitchell Lichtenstein, Winston Chao and May Chin in *The Wedding Banquet*

ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, not only helped pave the way for greater cinematic representation of gay and Asian characters for U.S. audiences, but it helped save the company that coproduced it, Good Machine.

Lee and the New York-based company founded by Ted Hope and James Schamus took intertwining paths to success. The two parties had been circling each other in 1990, and ended up working together on Lee's feature debut, *Pushing Hands* (1991), among Good Machine's initial projects.

However, it was *The Wedding Banquet*—about a gay, mixed Asian/American couple who stage a mock wedding for the benefit of visiting parents from Taiwan, and the centerpiece of Lee's "Father Knows Best" trilogy—that broke Lee's career stateside. But the screenplay, which Lee wrote with Neil Peng, veered toward melodrama, recalls Schamus.

"Inside the script was a great idea," he adds, "great characters, great setup, and even a structure that if you turned it into a romantic comedy, it really worked."

Lee not only warmed to the idea, but when Schamus started "pounding away at the screenplay," as he puts it, "a lot of Ang's notes were very simple. Things like, 'make it funnier.'"

For the titular scene, which was filmed at the Sheraton's ballroom near La Guardia airport, local Asian-American nonactors gladly pitched in as extras.

"There was such community spirit and a rooting interest in Ang Lee's work after *Pushing Hands* that all of Queens

came out," says Schamus.

The film was accepted for competition by the Berlin International Film Festival, even though it had been rejected by every sales agent who had seen it. Before Hope and Schamus boarded the plane, they informed their staff they'd have to sell the film themselves; otherwise they'd need to vacate their New York office. "We really didn't have money for rent," says Schamus.

The film's screening at Berlin's Zoo Palast proved a revelation. "Within about three or four minutes, the audience reactions became almost riotous," remembers Schamus. "And at the end of the screening, it was almost pandemonium. For the next four days, Ted and I sold every single territory in the world. We became an international sales company as a result of nobody else wanting the movie."

*The Wedding Banquet*, which cost \$700,000 to make, ended up being the most profitable film of 1993, with a worldwide gross of \$23.6 million, according to *Variety*.

At the time, Schamus had already played a key role in the burgeoning New Queer Cinema movement, having served as executive producer on Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991). Since the movement was fueled by anger and political frustration over the AIDS crisis, Schamus was concerned *The Wedding Banquet* might be perceived as "not reading the room."

"It was not written and produced by gay people, and it was also not adhering to, at that point, the critical norm of the New Queer Cinema," he says. "It was very much an old-fashioned Hollywood screwball comedy." ■