

BILLION DOLLAR FILMMAKER

# EVEN BETTER LUCK TOMORROW

By Scott Foundas Photographs by Michael Lewis

**Imagine that you are 42 years old,** your last three films earned more than \$1.1 billion at the worldwide box office, you have transformed a sagging franchise into a robust film series, and you are a native Mandarin speaker at a time when Hollywood is hungry to plant a flag in the Chinese market.

In short, it's a great moment to be Justin Lin.



# The unassuming man who sits on a sofa in his editing suite on the Universal Studios lot

on a recent afternoon might easily be mistaken for the UCLA grad student he once was rather than one of the movie industry's prime directors. Fresh-faced and attired in a Nike golf shirt, he politely excuses the acrid aroma of fermented soybeans emanating from the take-out container on his lap.

When he first embarked on the *Fast & Furious* franchise, there were days when Lin had trouble getting past the security guards at the studio's front gates — something, he says only half jokingly, that still happens from time to time.

"I don't look like a director," he says, by which he means partly his age but mostly his ethnicity.

It is just over a month before the release of *Fast & Furious 6*, the fourth Lin-directed entry in Universal's popular street-racing series, and two weeks before Lin must turn over his final cut to the studio. Just two days earlier, he was still on set, shooting a few last-minute inserts with one of his stars, Dwayne Johnson. Now Lin is scrutinizing visual effects shots, some of which fail to

meet his standards for realism. "You get to play with physics on these movies," Lin says, noting that all of the series' engine-revving action is executed live on the set, by a crack team of second unit directors, picture car coordinators and stuntmen. CGI is used only to enhance what's already there.

One of the principal audience pleasures of any *Fast* movie comes from seeing heavy machinery perform gravity-defying feats of the sort usually reserved for Ringling Bros. and the New York City Ballet. In the case of *Fast 6*'s piece de resistance — a complex chase along a winding cliffside highway involving a small fleet of vehicles, a helicopter and a tank — that meant spending one full month of the film's grueling 150-day schedule shooting in the Canary Islands, fine-tuning every screeching halt, spinning reverse and mid-air jump. On a large monitor, one of Lin's editors plays the latest version of the sequence, in which bodies hang from and leap between vehicles with astonishing grace, while the tank smashes through full-sized cars as if they were straw.

"We didn't need a tank sequence," remarks Lin, "but there were three character moments I had to have at that point, which had to do with the idea of trust, and once I realized what those were I started designing the action to go around that." Sometimes, Lin says, it's easier to reveal the nature of a character through action rather than dialogue.

Indie guru John Pierson, who has had Lin as a guest speaker in his U. of Texas film class, says, "I think because he comes from an indie/film-school background, he's managed to keep these films rooted in the physical world, which makes a big difference. On top of that, he brings a genuine enthusiasm for the material and ... for adding to the characters."

## Tokyo Gear-Shift

Lin was still enrolled at UCLA when the first *Fast and the Furious*, directed by Rob Cohen, hit theaters in 2001. He remembers excitedly going to see it, having recently learned about the subculture of illegal street racing from a documentary made by some fellow students.

He was particularly intrigued by the preponderance of Asian-American drivers, who would race their heavily modified imports against American-made muscle cars in a show of ethnic pride. But he was disappointed that in the debut picture "the only Asian-Americans are the bad guys."

He was similarly unimpressed four years later when Universal's then chairwoman Stacey Snider approached him about directing the third *Fast* movie, subtitled *Tokyo Drift*. At the time, Lin was still hot from his 2002 breakout Sundance hit *Better Luck Tomorrow* and had just wrapped his first studio picture, the Disney military drama *Annapolis*. Meanwhile, the *Fast* series seemed to be running on fumes. A 2003 sequel, *2 Fast*

## Fast Franchise Finds Family Ties

Shift from street racing to heists supercharged grosses

By Marc Graser





"This is a franchise where they're like, **'You want to do what? OK. Go.'**"

2 *Furious*, had cost double the original film's \$38 million budget, but only slightly surpassed the former's \$207 million global gross. Star Vin Diesel and Cohen had both jumped ship after the first movie. And now Snider, producer Neal Moritz and screenwriter Chris Morgan were proposing a stand-alone installment minus the original characters, set in Tokyo and focused on the titular "drift" racing, in which competitors steer and brake their way around hairpin turns in an elegant gliding motion.

But the first script Lin read was "all cars drifting around Buddha statues and geisha girls," so he passed. Which only made the studio want him more.

Finally, Lin took the assignment, but under the condition he be allowed to make certain changes. One involved wooing Diesel back for a film-ending cameo that would link *Tokyo Drift* back to the preceding films and open the door for more sequels. Lin recalls an eight-hour meeting with the actor, in which he used Diesel's affection for the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* to explain how he wanted to deepen the *Fast* series' characters and make them more mythic, seeding some ideas that came to fruition over the three subsequent movies.

There were other battles to be fought, such as Lin's insistence that *Tokyo Drift* co-star Sonny Chiba, one of the legends of 1970s martial arts cinema, be allowed to deliver his lines in subtitled Japanese. *Tokyo Drift* only grossed \$158.5 million worldwide, but it had been made for a lower budget, so that was enough to keep the franchise going.

For 2009's *Fast & Furious*, Lin had the full original cast back on board, plus a number of new additions (including Johnson, Korean-American Sung Kang and Israeli actress Gal Gadot) that have transformed the franchise into one that

**The first** *Fast and the Furious* is starting to look like a small independent film.

Hardly a low-budget actioner in 2001, when it was made for around \$38 million, its sequels now cost Universal Pictures north of \$125 million for. The sixth installment opens May 24, with a seventh to follow in 2014, and U is aiming to spin off Dwayne Johnson's character into his own franchise.

With Justin Lin in the director's chair,

the franchise has thrived by steering away from the first three films' narrow focus on street racing and urban car culture in the U.S., which appealed to a limited audience, and reframing the series as stories about a close-knit team that pulls off daring heists around the world.

"At Justin's core and what makes him a really special filmmaker, he's always a champion of the underdogs," says Troy

Craig Poon, president of Lin's production company, Perfect Storm Entertainment.

"I think what people resonate with in *The Fast and the Furious* is these characters become a family, an unconventional family. People from around the world can't wait to see this non-traditional family come together."

Donna Langley, co-chairman of Universal Pictures, says that while *Fast* has evolved into a legit-

imate action franchise, "what's unique is that we've maintained the heart and soul of the original film — a movie about family, people with a code and characters that are archetypal even though they're anti-heroes and on the wrong side of the law."

Langley says with the original stars coming back and that theme of family, "the team is now assembled as a team of Robin Hoods. They have a noble cause."

So the franchise can go anywhere in the world their driving skills might be needed: Los Angeles and Miami, the Mexican desert, Rio de Janeiro and now Spain and London.

The shift in tone clearly helped Universal, and longtime producers Neal H. Moritz and Vin Diesel, expand its audience for the *Fast* films — especially in overseas territories.

Langley says the plot of the fourth installment forced

the series to shoot abroad: the characters can't return to the U.S. since they were extradited. "So we set it in Rio to maintain the Latin roots of the franchise before heading to Europe (something fans had asked for)." With the sixth film also set partly in Spain, the studio also hopes to appeal to Spanish speakers.

Casting has also revved interest, with the addition of Johnson, Luke Evans and Gina Carano to a

multi-racial cast that includes Tyrese Gibson, Michelle Rodriguez, Chris "Ludacris" Bridges, Sung Kang, Gal Gadot, Elsa Pataky, plus original stars Diesel, Paul Walker and Jordana Brewster.

Says Poon: "It can't be underscored enough how much people want to have characters to identify with, whether it's gender or ethnically or belief-wise. Justin has done so much more in that space than most filmmakers."



Veilside Fortune RX-7

## Auto-Agnostic Auteur

Fast Casts a Diverse Array of Vehicles **By Marc Graser**

### When it comes to

Universal's *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, the cars have been as much of a star attraction as the actors behind the wheel.

That comes with the territory when your films are based around the culture of street racing.

But instead of the typical Hollywood car chase line up of foreign luxury or exotic sports cars, the *Fast* films have put the spotlight on American muscle cars of the 1960s and '70s.

Dodge in particular has benefitted from the series' success and is again prominently featured in *Fast & Furious 6*, which races into theaters on May 24.

The automaker has appeared in the franchise since its 2001 debut and has used the series to hype its redesigned Charger and Challenger nameplates. Vin Diesel's glossy black 1969 Charger, nicknamed "the Judge," serves as the series' signature hero car, and Diesel also was seen in a Challenger SRT8 in *Fast Five* and drives a 1969 Dodge Daytona in the sixth pic.

Dodge stepped up as a major promotional partner for *Fast Five* in 2011, with a sizable



1969 Ford Mustang and 1970 Ford Escort RS2000

"Car companies love (the franchise) because it is grounded in reality. **The cars play themselves.**"

— U's Stephanie Sperber

ad campaign touting the tagline "Car Chases Make Movies Better," and returns for *Fast 6*. Yet while the exposure for Dodge has been significant, it hasn't had the bigscreen to itself.

Given that production of each film has required hundreds of vehicles — more than 300 for *Fast 6*, according to the picture car coordinator Dennis McCarthy — *Fast* ride wranglers have also turned to other automakers to match models with the traits of the



Paul Walker and Tyrese Gibson with souped-up Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution



1969 Dodge Charger and Toyota Supra



Nissan Skyline GTR and Dodge Charger

films' characters, making the franchise fairly auto-agnostic.

Diesel's Dominic Toretto has also driven a 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle and 1973 Chevrolet Camaro — both massive American muscle cars —

while co-star Paul Walker has favored the sportier Nissan Skyline GT-R, Toyota Supra and modified Subaru Impreza WRX STI. Mitsubishi was a partner on the second film, *2 Fast 2 Furious*. The new pic also

features a 1970 Plymouth Barracuda, 2012 Nissan GT-R, 1969 Ford Mustang, 1970 Ford Escort RS2000, 1971 Jensen Interceptor, 2006 Aston Martin Vanquish and 2010 BMW M5.

Now that Chrysler is owned by Italian automaker Fiat, the new owner enabled Universal to integrate the company's other foreign models like Alfa Romeo in key action sequences, as well. "Because the car placement was so U.S. focused in the past, it wasn't easy to work with brands whose cars weren't sold in Europe or the rest of the world," says

Universal Partnerships and Licensing president Stephanie Sperber.

What's been good for Dodge has also helped other carmakers tied to the *Fast & Furious*.

"The car companies love (the franchise) because it is grounded in reality," Sperber says. "It's not sci-fi, it's not something that is so out of the ordinary, in terms of how the cars are handled or how the people are driving them. Guns don't rise up out of the hood. The cars play themselves and that makes it really attractive for car manufacturers. They can showcase their cars in a way where they look fantastic, show off their attributes and don't take them into a pure fantasy realm."

Sperber adds that the film's multi-ethnic cast is also attractive to carmakers.

Their brands have received even more exposure through such videogames as the upcoming *Fast & Furious: Showdown*, out for most platforms May 24, as well as licensed merchandise like radio controlled toys and a new Hot Wheels deal.

*Fast* consumer products are an expanding business for the studio, especially as the films attract a younger fanbase.

"It's been aging down consistently," Sperber says. "The original audience that went to see the first one often times now have kids and are bringing them to see the films."

is easily Hollywood's most racially and ethnically diverse. In turn, foreign box office has been soaring. *Fast & Furious* collected \$363 million in global ticket sales and two years later, *Fast Five* sped its way to \$626 million. Expectations for *Fast 6* are even higher. And Asians are no longer the bad guys.

Lin credits Universal with allowing him to take bigger and bolder risks with each successive film. "Usually when you're successful, the tendency is to be very conservative and say, 'Well, it worked here. Just do the same thing again.' But this is a franchise where they're like, 'You want to do *what?* OK. Go.'" That made it hard to turn down the offer to direct the planned seventh *Fast* film. But Lin has arrived at a place in his career where he feels ready to begin a new chapter.

The *Fast* movies have paid off Lin's mortgage for a while, and allowed him to give his parents — Taiwanese immigrants who spent 25 years running a mom-and-pop seafood joint in Anaheim — an early retirement. "So now I can make choices that I wouldn't have been able to make in the last 10 years," he says.

#### **Eyeing the China Market**

He also oversees a small media empire: a culture blog (*You Offend Me You Offend My Family*); an original-content YouTube channel; and two production shingles—one (Barnstorm Pictures) has a first-look deal with Universal, the other (Perfect Storm Entertainment) is a joint venture with Chinese entrepreneur Bruno Wu's Seven Stars Film Studios.

Between the two production companies, Lin has an array of projects in various stages of development, ranging from a remake of the classic 1970s Samurai series *Lone Wolf and Cub* to more independent fare such as a planned adaptation of David Henry Hwang's Broadway play *Chinglish*.

Hwang says, "There's a desire on the part of Hollywood — and all American industries really — to get a foothold in China and take advantage of this market, combined with an amazing degree of ignorance about what it actually would take to achieve that." Hwang has also collaborated with Lin on a YouTube adaptation of his play *Yellow Face*, set to premiere this summer. He sees Lin as someone who may help to bridge the gap.

"I get that the Chinese market is growing, but I don't think you can pander to that," Lin says. "It's like when people say *Fast and the Furious* is just fast cars and hot chicks — if it really was that easy, every studio would be doing it and making a lot of money."

"I told Bruno, 'Let's build movies that will play around the world.' And China is a big part of the world."

## **Early Praise From Critic**

When Ebert famously stood up for a rookie director

**Justin Lin's** feature debut as a solo helmer, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, hit Sundance in 2002. Its subject matter wasn't too unfamiliar: a group of high-achieving Asian-American high school kids who lead parallel lives of crime.

But like many films at the festival,



Roger Ebert fairly thundered his defense of *Better Luck Tomorrow* after a 2002 Sundance screening.

it drew some jeers as well as cheers. One famous jeer-and-cheer exchange involved the late, great film critic Roger Ebert.

inside and see what matters to you and the writers." Oh no he didn't! Those remarks ignited a heated discus-

sion between the filmmakers onstage and others in the audience — until Ebert rose to deliver what became a legendary smackdown:

"What I find very offensive and condescending about your statement is nobody would say to a bunch of white filmmakers, 'How could you do this to your people?'" ... Asian-American characters have the right to be whoever they hell they want to be. They don't have to represent 'their people!'" Ebert shouted over swelling cheers

from the crowd (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lsz-P9YV3jbc>).

Ebert's review — he gave it four stars — showed his understanding of what Lin was trying to

achieve: "**Better Luck Tomorrow**" is a coming-of-age film for Asian-Americans in American cinema. Like African-American films that take race for granted and get on with the characters and the story, Lin is making a movie where race is not the point but simply the given. ... Lin, who directed, co-wrote and co-produced, here reveals himself as a skilled and sure director, a rising star. ... His film is uncompromising and doesn't chicken out with a U-turn ending."

The clip still endures on YouTube and many indie film websites. A champion of Asian-American cinema, Ebert emerged as a bigger hero to this filmmaking community.

— Carole Horst

## **Perfect Storm Ready to Thunder**

Lin's company set to overturn stereotypes

**Perfect Storm** has been building quietly, but look for it to break loudly in the weeks and months to come.

Justin Lin's production company, formed in January 2012 as a joint venture with Bruno Wu's Seven Stars Film Studio, has opened offices in Los Angeles, New York, Beijing and Shanghai.

It initially focused on film and TV, but has acquired a range of intellectual property for various media. Its proxy, Troy Craig



Perfect Storm president Troy Craig Poon

streaming VOD channels in Asia. Then, last week, Danielle Woodrow was tapped to lead Perfect Storm's Television division, which already has a first-look deal with Sony TV. In the coming weeks it will announce its development slate — those announcements savvily timed to coincide with the buzz for *Fast 6*, Lin's swan song with the series.

"Most people nowadays know Justin as the guy who directed

several of the *Fast & Furious* installments," Poon says. "But people forget he's a three-time Sundancer. His roots are indie. He's got an appetite for such a diverse range of stories."

"A big part of our DNA is trying to subvert genres or stereotypes and try to flip them on their head a little bit," says Poon. "That's what excites us, being realistic about the society we live in."

— David S. Cohen

## **Billion-Dollar Blacktop**

Justin Lin's Fast track to big B.O. coin, at home and abroad

TITLE	DOMESTIC GROSS	FOREIGN GROSS	TOTAL GROSS
<b>Fast Five</b> (2011)	\$209,837,675	418,796,497	628,634,172
<b>Fast &amp; Furious</b> (2009)	155,152,236	203,500,000	358,652,236
<b>Finishing the Game: The Search for a New Bruce Lee</b> (2007)	52,868	351	53,219
<b>The Fast &amp; the Furious: Tokyo Drift</b> (2006)	62,514,544	95,950,863	158,465,407
<b>Annapolis</b> (2006)	17,127,123	369,869	17,496,992
<b>Better Luck Tomorrow</b> (2002)	3,802,392	6,834	3,809,226

GROSS FOR ALL FILMS: **\$1,167,111,252**