

Interview: Tamahori on Hussein and War

By [Galina Stolyarova](#)

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Dominic Cooper plays Uday Hussein and his look-alike in “The Devil’s Double” now showing in local cinemas.

ST. PETERSBURG — Lee Tamahori, director of the Bond movie “Die Another Day” and “The Devil’s Double,” the tale of Saddam Hussein’s Caligula-like son Uday and his double, which is now on release in Moscow, is full of surprises. At the beginning of an interview during a recent visit to St. Petersburg, the filmmaker announced that he had just visited the Siege of Leningrad Museum.

“Museums are not quite my cup of tea,” the director said in response to my look of surprise. “The point is that they can be a valuable source of information.”

Tamahori says he is intrigued by the presentation of World War II in modern Russia, which he said had a strong aftertaste of Soviet-era propaganda, although not in an entirely negative sense. “In the U.S. and Europe, historical displays, regardless of the period that they cover, are dispassionate,” he said. “The St. Petersburg museum, by contrast, has a very emotional feel.”

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"I really wanted to see the exhibition because I have always admired the courage and the stamina of the Siege survivors, and I wanted to hear their stories," he added. "I was amazed by the photograph of a female sniper who killed 145 German soldiers and trained more than 100 young snipers. And she was only 35. Unbelievable."

Courage and stamina are the human qualities that Tamahori values most in life. It is largely for that reason that the main characters in his movies are tough guys in tough circumstances, people going through the most brutal tests and challenges.

"If I were to collate my films into some sort of group, the unifying factor would be that these are films about survivors," Tamahori said. "People behave very differently under extreme stress: Some give up at once, some panic or run around chaotically, and some mobilize, resist and fight on."

"It was huge fun filming 'The Edge' with Anthony Hopkins; it is a story of two guys who find themselves in the middle of nowhere after a plane crash, and they have to survive like in prehistoric times, defending themselves from wild animals and cooking their meals on open fires in the forest," the filmmaker recalls.

Survival is also the dominant theme of Tamahori's "Mulholland Falls," in which the main character is a successful Los Angeles cop for whom a random affair with a beautiful woman ends in personal disaster, complete with blackmail, threats and all sorts of catastrophes.

Tamahori's new film, "The Devil's Double," tells the story of Lieutenant Latif Yahya, who is forced to work as the double of Saddam Hussein's son, Uday. The character of Latif is dignity personified, and his moral code would do honor to a knight or warrior of any epoch. Latif carries out his own personal resistance to the regime that he despises but is forced to be part of.

"Some critics call my portrayal of Latif one-dimensional because I made him a sort of classic American Western character, very stubborn, with trained muscles and a lot of nerve, who tells himself 'I can do it!'" Tamahori explains. "Some people would like to see a more sensitive and complicated character here, but it was my choice to make Latif the way I made him. A sensitive man would never survive in circumstances like that."

The film received a special prize at the St. Petersburg International Kinoforum last month and is now on in English at 35MM and Pioneer.

Tamahori enjoys trying on the hats of heroes himself and imagining what he would have done under the same pressure. The question of how an ordinary person becomes a hero has long been of special interest to the director.

"I have asked myself that question many, many times, and, having read and heard many facts and opinions on the subject, I can say that heroism is not a quality that one can train or rehearse, even at the best military academy or spy school — otherwise soldiers would not desert," Tamahori said. "At some stage, life suddenly throws you a challenge, and there is no time to weigh up any pros and cons; you simply act according to your instincts. Heroism is when you are prepared to save another man's life without hesitation. In a sense, I would call it an instinct."

When working with Pierce Brosnan on “Die Another Day,” of the James Bond series, the biggest challenge for Tamahori was to create a fresh take on the much-loved hero while preserving his essence.

“I chose not to make Brosnan’s Bond go through the typical classic ‘Bondian’ situations, but instead made him undergo ultrastressful, shocking experiences: He is kidnapped, taken to North Korea, thrown in jail, tortured. ... ❏ If I had had a choice, I would have preferred to shoot one of the new Bond series, but I was invited to do the last one from the old Bonds. This means that I was facing the task of keeping all those death rays from space and making the film realistic nonetheless!”

The central characters of Tamahori’s films are virtually never women, which is no accident.

“I understand men much more than I understand women; women I simply admire,” the director smiles. “All in all, women are much more complicated creatures than us men. One important thing that a woman should remember — and this is often neglected — is that a man normally has a difficulty doing several things at once. Nagging a guy when he is busy doing something is the best way to make him go nuts, too.

“On the positive side, men are simply made and easily predictable. There is plenty of opportunity to take advantage of them!”

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