

## Rick Yune and his iron fists

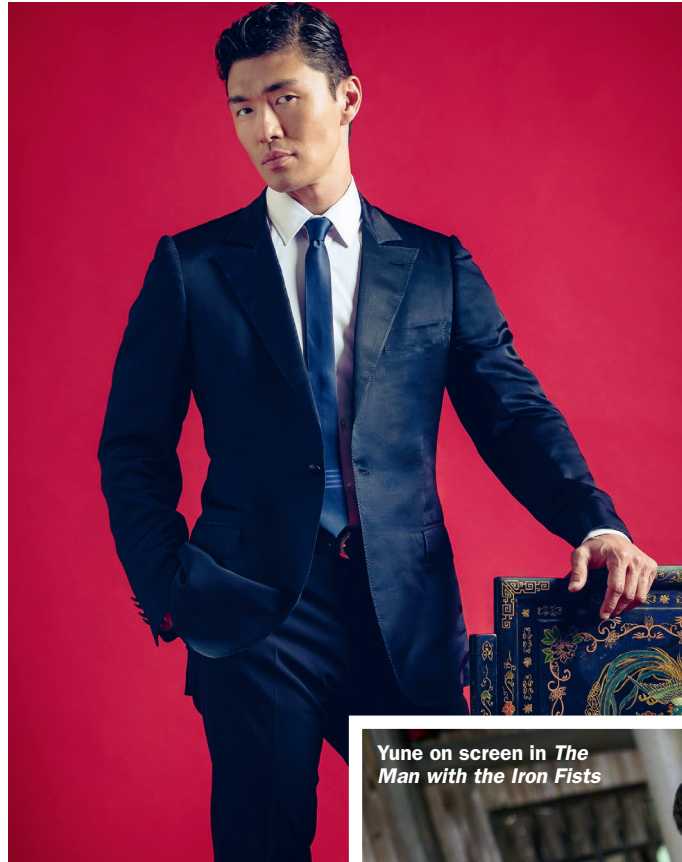
The Korean actor stars alongside Russell Crowe and Lucy Liu in rapper RZA's first movie, *The Man with the Iron Fists*. Rob Garratt sat down for a chat with the former Wall Street trader turned Bond villain

Rick Yune is a man of many contradictions. A former billboard model for Versace and Ralph Lauren, and a Hollywood heartthrob who was once voted the 'world's sexiest villain', Yune is more proud of his ability to scoff ten racks of ribs in half an hour – a talent that once won him a speed-eating competition (there's still a plaque at London's The Big Easy Crab Shack to prove it). Once a Golden Gloves boxer and a martial arts expert who qualified for Olympic trials in taekwondo, he also learned his craft as a hedge fund trader on Wall Street. And let's not forget his day job as a Hollywood actor: his most recent role was in the Quentin Tarantino-presented martial arts flick *The Man With the Iron Fists*, starring alongside heavyweights Russell Crowe and Lucy Liu. Rick Yune appears to have it all; brains, brawn, looks – and the ability to eat an inordinate amount of meat.

### 'Cinema used to be about men. Now it's about boys'

But despite the Korean-American actor's enviable CV – which includes roles in blockbusters *The Fast & the Furious* and 007 movie *Die Another Day*, alongside earning an MBA degree in business – there's nothing in the least arrogant about 41-year-old Yune. Mention the 'world's sexiest villain' accolade, from *People* magazine for a turn as megalomaniac Bond villain Zao in 2002, and he scoffs. 'I've got to take this with a grain of salt,' he says, taking an early-morning call from his home in Los Angeles. 'I've seen guys who look like a car crash, but when you step in front of a camera everyone thinks you're sexy.'

It's not his looks that are on show in *The Man with the Iron Fists*, but his moves. Set around the turn of the 18th century in imperial China, Yune plays sword-swiping Zen Yi, who is called upon to avenge his father's death. A simple premise to justify a lot of bone-cracking violence, Yune can breeze over the plot in just a few seconds. 'I'm off in the mountains



falling apart," he understands what it's like to have bullets flying by your head, what it's like to depart the world at any moment. So when something comes up, he does what the English say: "Keep calm and carry on."

But RZA had a little help crafting *Iron Fists* in the form of Quentin Tarantino. The pair met back in 2003 when Tarantino asked RZA to help out as music supervisor on the *Kill Bill* movies. In exchange, Tarantino spent six years teaching the rapper the filmmaking ropes. RZA has since compared *Iron Fists* to the 'graduation exam' at the end of his apprenticeship. 'Quentin was involved from the very start,' says Yune. 'He mentored RZA, he helped with the writing, with the script – it was completely collaborative.'

It wasn't easy – Yune did all his own stunts, working up to 20 hours a day in harsh conditions and with an all-Chinese crew – but it clearly paid off. 'Some of the top guys were very pleased with the movie,' gushes Yune. 'Russell said it was a few beats away from perfect. Quentin said he was intimidated by some of fight scenes.'

romancing the love of my life when I hear my father has been murdered. So I leave my woman and go to avenge the murder. I hook up with RZA's character and Russell [Crowe]'s character and save the day.'

That's right, RZA – as in the leader of Wu-Tang Clan. After first stepping behind the camera about a decade ago, the Grammy Award-winning musician is making his directional feature debut with *The Man with the Iron Fists*.

Yune met the rapper seven years ago in far from drama-free circumstances. It was an arranged rendezvous in a Japanese restaurant: the Clan leader was there to introduce Yune to a distant relation who is fluent in a form of street fighting that the actor was researching. Midway through the meal, the relation stood up and punched Yune. 'I said, "Let's do this somewhere else,"' he remembers.

Yune on screen in *The Man with the Iron Fists*



'We went out back for a full training session, a lot of sparring, that's where RZA and I bonded. A lot of people would have reacted differently.'

It's this calm, collected attitude that Yune claims made RZA a model first-time director. 'He grew up in Brooklyn, one of the toughest neighbourhoods in the world. It helps to give you that understanding of risk. Where some directors might go, "I'm not going to get that shot, the whole world is

Yune's next movie is already in post production: he stars alongside Gerard Butler and Morgan Freeman in *Olympus Has Fallen*, a White House terrorist drama (*In the Line of Fire* meets *Heat*). 'It's fantastic because it's going towards the type of films I saw growing up,' says Yune. 'Cinema used to be about men. Now it's about boys.' *The Man with the Iron Fists* is released on November 22. Read our review on the opposite page.

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