

Director Xie Deju about STARRY ROAD

“Always a torn shirt to fix”

Sports is often seen as a stepping stone towards social progress. But for the brothers Hai and He the occasion is very concrete. It is the prospect of new shoes that spurs them to join the school's rope skipping team. Not warmly welcomed by the seniors, they soon regret their decision. But when a young teacher arrives with new methods and techniques, progress is made immediately.

Hai and He are the kind of fellows that can muddle their way through almost every situation. Their sparkling performance adds a portion of zest of life to the Chinese film STARRY ROAD by director Xie Deju.

In a memorable opening scene, the two brothers turn directly towards each other (and the camera) in a conversation that – what else could you expect? – escalates into a hefty squabble.

Xie Deju: We stayed true to our philosophy of realistic cinema. That is why many realistic elements seeped into it, like the brothers fighting and

quarrelling all the time. For them fighting was easier than acting! The opening scene introduces us to the main characters and their love-hate relationship.

Are rigor and discipline crucial qualities for young sportsmen?

Deju: In order to achieve their goals, everywhere around the world athletes have to maintain a strict discipline. In the film it is the gym teacher who disciplines his students, getting them up early every day to practise. This is the way things go at the Qixing Primary School, which was the model for our story. Even if students can eventually skip a training session, most of them will get to school early every day to do their exercising. In the film you see them training near the water reservoir or in *'the tiger hole'*, an idyllic garden constructed by the school principal to celebrate the harmony between nature and mankind.

Were you working in the first place with actors or with athletes?

Deju: The rope skipping team of the



Qixing Primary School served as a model for the story, it is them acting in the movie. They are national or even world champions. Among them we selected the ones with the best acting skills as leading performers, and we rehearsed to improve their skills. Throughout the film you can feel their dedication and passion towards life and sports.

How did you master the scenes in which all the many young actors perform together?

Deju: They are children, naughty and playful, so those scenes weren't exactly easy to shoot. Usually I felt like shouting until I'd lose my voice. Fortunately these kids were also smart and thoughtful, and we worked together towards a common goal. Gathering so many kids together forced the costume department to work extra hours. There was always at least a

torn shirt to fix.

How popular is rope skipping in China?

Deju: It is massively widespread in China, it is even included in the sports curriculum at school. In the cities as well as in remote mountain areas, you will find children performing rope skipping routines. Just like basketball and table tennis, rope skipping is a low-cost sport, which makes it even more popular.

How do you score at rope skipping?

Deju: As a student my rope skipping skills were very poor. But while shooting the film, these school kids taught me some new tricks, so I got better at it now.

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Gert Hermans
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