Director Cary Joji Fukunaga On Directing the Delayed James Bond Film 'No Time to Die'

With the newest installment of James Bond—which is now postponed to 2021—acclaimed art-house director Cary Joji Fukunaga takes the reins of one of film's most storied franchises for Daniel Craig's final bow.

CARY JOJI FUKUNAGA always envisioned a cinematic ending to his first mega-budget film: After completing No Time to Die—the 25th installment of the $16 billion James Bond franchise—the acclaimed writer-director would disappear into darkness. What Fukunaga didn't foresee, however,was how long his fade-to-black would last or that his blockbuster-inwaiting would also remain hidden from view.

Back in late February, as he raced to complete post-production on No Time to Die, Fukunaga was planning to reward himself with a darkness retreat in Germany. "I mean, what else do you do, as a semi-introvert, after almost two straight years working under pressure? Obviously, live in complete darkness and isolation," he says. After overseeing a massive production that spanned five countries on two continents, Fukunaga was looking forward to filling his days with meditation and creative visualization in a lightless cavern. In a state of sensory deprivation, attendees of the retreat often talk to themselves, he says. "A lot of people that do, face their demons. I would, I think."

In that sense, the Covid-19 pandemic, which has changed everything, changed little. Instead of a 10-day sojourn in Germany, Fukunaga, 43, took refuge at his house in a rural corner of New York's Hudson Valley for five months. While this wasn't the coda he had foreseen, it was fitting.

"The filmmaking process so mimics a life," Fukunaga says. "You start off by yourself and you end by yourself, despite all the craziness in the middle."

When we first met at Goldcrest Post Production in the Soho section of London in early February, Fukunaga was already tracking the virus's spread. He soon realized Covid-19 was going to be a global tragedy and discussed the uncertainty with the film's actors. "All of us felt like, as with a lot of filmmaking, you can't really make plans for the future," Fukunaga says. "You wait and see what happens."

They didn't have to wait long. On March 4, less than a week before Italy imposed its national lockdown, it was announced that No Time to Die was being pushed from April to November.

When Fukunaga heard the news, "there were a couple of hours of F—, it's not happening," he says. "And then pretty quickly, I mentally moved on.... I was at peace with it." The decision was made by the producers and the studio executives, which suited Fukunaga just fine. "I think they made a very smart decision to be one of the first to say out loud, 'This is a big thing. We're moving the film,'" he says. "Because a lot of people were in denial. Some still are."

Six months later, with the world still besieged by Covid-19, there is as much fear as fanfare surrounding the release of Fukunaga's first Bond film. The buzz around the early trailers and the release of Billie Eilish's title track has faded. Most major movies have shifted to 2021 or gone straight to video on demand or streaming. And No Time to Die is no different. In early October, the film was delayed once again to April 2021. When No Time to Die does finally brave a theatrical release, it will be one of the biggest and, as Daniel Craig's final turn as Bond, arguably have the most at stake.

And it's possible the movie moves again. "I think there's always the potential of that," Fukunaga says. "I look at it unemotionally right now.... There are so many bigger things happening. I have friends who are losing businesses, restaurants, and other friends who have lost family members." Ultimately, whenever it is released, the movie's fate is beyond Fukunaga's control. "The film will come out when it's right," he says, "and it will perform in the context of this new world, in which no one really can define what success or failure means."

"IT HAS BEEN LIKE living on adrenaline for a year and a half," says Fukunaga, back in February, of making his inaugural action film, a 20- month endurance race run at sprinter's pace. Clad in slouchy black jeans, Birkenstock slip-ons and a tan pullover sweater, with his often conversation-worthy hair tucked into a maroon knit cap,

Fukunaga exudes the same preternatural calm he displayed on set. "I think Cary's heart beats at 40 beats a minute. He's like a marathon runner," Craig says. "Nothing seems to knock him down. I'm just so impressed by the way he motored through."

The film's teaser trailer—which aired during the Super Bowl to an audience of 102 million in the U.S. alone—features Bond, chased from either end of a high bridge by villains, jumping off the span, clinging only to a cable that might or might not be moored. It's a fair representation of the headlong plunge that Fukunaga, beset by the rigors of a production in flux and his own recent string of stymied film projects, took diving into this film even before Covid-19 entered the frame.

For an art-house darling such as Fukunaga, the stakes and scale were of Brobdingnagian proportions. MGM spent an estimated $5.7 million to air the 30-second Super Bowl spot—roughly equal to the entire budget of Fukunaga's last feature, 2015's Beasts of No Nation. For Bond, Fukunaga was given more than 40 times as much—a reported $250 million—with similarly elevated expectations.

(Earning anything less than $1 billion globally would have widely been seen as a disappointment before Covid19.) "It didn't seem like it was $250 million, I'll tell you that much," says Fukunaga with a laugh. "We still have the same concerns. You're always cutting stuff.

Ultimately finances were the least of the pressures. Bond movies are events, loaded with the expectations of a fan base built over six decades. As much as the franchise is buoyed by legacy, it's also burdened by it. Consider the titular hero in 2020: an aging white male steeped in misogyny making his first appearance since the emergence of the #MeToo movement. And it's hard not to reconsider this brutish rogue agent with a license to kill in the wake of George Floyd's murder by law enforcement officers.

In addition, Fukunaga was not the first director attached to the project. The franchise's producers, Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson, previously enlisted Academy Award winner Danny Boyle but abruptly parted ways with him in August 2018, citing creative differences, which reportedly included disagreement over whether to kill off the venerable 007. Rather than shut down the production, the producers decided to plow forward, in part to keep Craig on board for one last ride in the Aston Martin

Desperate circumstances called for a desperate director. Improbably, and despite being legitimately in demand, Fukunaga—the wunderkind who dazzled Sundance with 2009's Sin Nombre and made the haunting Jane Eyre in 2011—fit the bill. His recent filmography reads like a ghost history. He co-wrote the screenplay for the 2017 adaptation of Stephen King's It but, due to differences with the studio, didn't end up directing it as planned. Other projects, too, were rumored but failed to materialize. It's now been nearly a decade since his last actual box-office film (Beasts of No Nation, which was bought by Netflix, received only a limited theatrical release).

In between, Fukunaga sojourned on the small screen, sometimes to great critical and popular acclaim (he won the best director Emmy for his work on the first season of HBO's True Detective, starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson) and sometimes less so (the 2018 Netflix miniseries Maniac, starring Emma Stone and Jonah Hill). Along the way, Fukunaga, who is by his own admission extremely meticulous and detail-oriented, got a reputation in some quarters as inflexible and unwilling to compromise. Almost as soon as filming began on No Time to Die, Craig suffered a serious ankle injury that required surgery and threw the already compressed schedule into chaos.

Fukunaga viewed the numerous constraints as a puzzle and ultimately an aid. "You just gotta make something cool with it—like Iron Chef, right?" he says. "It's much better to know what your limitations are than to have infinite possibilities, especially if you have limited time.

Despite the film's unyielding parameters, its producers saw Fukunaga's exacting nature as an asset. "He's a perfectionist, but that's what you want," says Broccoli. "He far exceeded anyone's expectations. He's made probably one of the best Bond films ever.... He's delivered a film on an epic scale, but it also has a tremendous, tremendous intimacy.... It's a classic Bond movie but also a Cary Fukunaga film."

Craig credits Fukunaga for making the actor's swan song both satisfying and complex. "What I think he's achieved—which is wonderful and a dream of mine—is to make it into a thriller," Craig says. "Yes, it has all of the things you need in a Bond movie but also is very affecting. You only have to look at Cary's other stuff to know he wants psychological depth in his work."

The other defining characteristic of Fukunaga's work is a sense of authenticity. His fiction often delivers documentary-like accuracy, and even the surrealism of Maniac was informed by his studying psychology and pharmacology. In preparation for No Time to Die, Fukunaga insisted on speaking to CIA, MI5 and MI6 field operatives.

“Cary’s a sponge for information,” says Idris Elba, who starred in Beasts of No Nation. “He peels the onion and gets really layered and textured in his films.”

Shooting that film in Ghana, Fukunaga assembled a cast with a number of first-time child actors and former soldiers and mercenaries. Amid the rigors of shooting, he contracted malaria. “Even when he was sick and being advised to stop,” Elba recalls, “he kept going.” In addition to writing, directing and producing, Fukunaga served as cinematographer.

“His simple thing,” Elba says, “was, ‘When I’m looking through the viewfinder, I can just see the truth a lot better.’ ”

By most accounts, however, Fukunaga requires some effort to reveal himself. “I consider him a great collaborator and dear friend,” says Rami Malek, who plays the archvillain Safin in No Time to Die. “I can usually lock people down, and he’s one that is still a bit of a mystery to me. I’m not sure that’s a bad thing.”

Fukunaga was born in Oakland, California, to a Swedish-American mother and a Japanese-American father who spent his first years in an internment camp. After his parents’ divorce, Fukunaga lived a peripatetic childhood in a variety of locales in Northern California and Mexico. He wrote his first screenplay at 14. Fukunaga majored in history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, studied geopolitics and international law at the Institut d’Études Politiques in Grenoble, France, and chased his dream of becoming a professional snowboarder for several years.

Following a knee injury, he decided to pursue filmmaking full time. He’d already worked some in the industry, including as a camera production assistant on the music video for Destiny’s Child’s “Survivor.” Then, at film school at NYU, Fukunaga won a Student Academy Award for Victoria Para Chino, his Spanish-language short about migrants who died from dehydration, overheating and suffocation in the back of a tractor trailer.

Neither his career choice nor its path has felt preordained or predictable — least of all his pursuit of Bond. When Fukunaga invited Broccoli to drinks in early 2016, he planned to pick up the tab. He was the one who was pitching. He wasn’t an obvious candidate to take the reins of any action franchise, much less one of the longest-running series in film history (and one that had never employed an American director), but he felt ready for something new and big. He also had meetings with executives at Marvel and Lucasfilm, but Bond felt more in his wheelhouse, with greater potential for psychological exploration. “If you think about the films I’ve done, they’re all about orphans, right?” Fukunaga says. “Literally, all of them: Sin Nombre, Jane Eyre, Beasts of No Nation—the characters have all sort of re-created themselves out of a burnt nest. So Bond fit perfectly into that paradigm.”

When the director’s chair for Bond 25, as it was then called, became available again in 2018, Broccoli and Wilson recalled Fukunaga’s interest and offered him the job. “He’s someone who’s been a maverick and taken on difficult projects with great enthusiasm and aplomb,” Broccoli says. He’s pretty fearless. So he went for it.”

Broccoli and Wilson decided to keep the basic production timetable and the time they'd booked at Pinewood Studios, lest they lose it to Marvel or Disney, but they scrapped Boyle's script and story. This meant Fukunaga was starting from scratch with a third of the time for preproduction typically needed for a film of this scale. Twenty-hour days were commonplace. "It was going into unknown territory with an unfinished screenplay," Fukunaga says. "I was writing before and after shoot days, on the weekends, just writing nonstop." Neal Purvis and Robert Wade also worked on the screenplay, as did Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who added a light, humorous and most of all British touch to the script.

She helped give Nomi, the fiery young Double-0 agent played by Lashana Lynch, and Paloma, the neophyte CIA operative portrayed by the Cuban-born actress Ana de Armas, their edge. "It was absolutely essential to Cary that Paloma be strong. He couldn't tolerate any characters—especially women, considering the history of 'Bond Girls'—being two-dimensional," says de Armas. "He called me, said he was writing this part for me and said she's Cuban and he wanted me to help make her real."

"He's this unique breed—uncompromising but also extremely collaborative," Malek says. "Those two things don't always coincide." Fukunaga worked closely with the Oscar winner, inviting his ideas as they shaped his character, making him as threatening, dread-inspiring and panic-inducing as possible.

As we sat in his office at Goldcrest, Fukunaga prepared to show me one final approved scene—a tense meeting between Malek's Safin and Madeleine, the psychiatrist and Bond love interest played by Léa Seydoux, that showed the ways in which he broke from the Bond formula.

"Could you pause for a second?" Fukunaga says. "Do you think we could show him the opening?"

Fukunaga exchanges a look with one of the film's editors, Tom Cross. It seems clear the sequence is meant to stay under wraps. "I think that's fine to play," Fukunaga says, overruling protocol. "This scene just doesn't make sense without the opening."

Typically, the pre-title sequences have been throwaway scenes packed with gratuitous chases, violence and sex. And in every Bond film, save the first (which had no pre-title sequence), they feature 007. However, with the opening scene, Fukunaga bucks tradition in every way: It's slow-paced, visually arresting, subtitled with dialogue in French and entirely Bond-free. Focusing instead on Madeleine's backstory, the opening is a terrifying episode from her childhood in which Safin, wearing a Japanese Noh mask, kills her mother, pursues Madeleine through the home and hunts her down on a frozen lake. "Some clown chasing a child around the house," Fukunaga says with a laugh. "Yeah, it's like I brought back It in the first five minutes of Bond."

Revisiting this film wasn't something Fukunaga was tempted to do. Despite the months of Covid-19 downtime, he wasn't tempted to recut or fiddle in any way. "It wasn't even a question of urge—we were done as far as the studio was concerned. That was it," he says.

Besides, “all of us were pretty satisfied that what we had was solid.”

Instead, Fukunaga devoted lockdown to work that had lain idle. “Because I wasn’t able to go into a dark cave in Germany, I was in this concentrated state,” he says. “I had the momentum of work mode going.”

He threw himself into several scripts. One was Stanley Kubrick’s legendary unproduced 1961 screenplay for Napoleon, which Fukunaga is slated to direct for HBO. He collaborated remotely with Tom Stoppard, who is writing Fukunaga’s long-gestating film about the bombing of Hiroshima.

Most recently, Fukunaga has been focused on his work as a producer on Good Joe Bell, a film based on the true story of a father who undertook a walk across America to call attention to the bullying of LGBTQ youth following his gay son Jadin’s suicide. Fukunaga had originally optioned the project with the intention of directing before taking on Bond. “So I’ve been pretty busy through lockdown. I haven’t really had a break yet,” Fukunaga says.

It’s mid-August, and he is speaking via Zoom from the Aegean island of Milos. He is in Greece making a short film for a commercial production house. “It’s an opportunity just to shoot again,” he says. “Reuniting with some of my Bond crew and trading stories of how we’ve gotten through the last six months—it’s been pretty great.”

Hypothetically speaking, Fukunaga would be interested in reuniting on another Bond film, or perhaps a series of films introducing the new 007. And Broccoli and Wilson want Fukunaga to return. “He’s certainly someone we’ll work with again,” Wilson says.

In reality, though, Fukunaga’s future with Bond will depend on the film’s reception. “I have never been able to predict how people react to something I’ve made,” Fukunaga says. “It could fly or completely fall. It doesn’t change how I view the film.” Several hot rumored plot points have made their rounds online during Covid-19: Bond is a father! (“I’ve heard those rumors. I can’t confirm or deny anything.”) Bond saves the world from a biological weapon and global pandemic! (“I can’t comment on that either.”) What is clear is that No Time to Die is more a tense psychological thriller than a popcorn flick. “God, I have no idea whether people have an appetite for that or not right now,” Fukunaga says.

Regardless, Fukunaga’s hope is that the movie’s release—whenever that may be—will bring him some emotional closure. “It doesn’t feel like the film’s journey is complete until it’s been shared,” he says. “Until then, it’s a secret.”

Before signing off, Fukunaga reveals another wish for himself and his film. “I’ve never seen it with an audience. I would love to watch it with an audience the first opportunity I get,” he says. “And that will probably be the next time and last time I see it.”