

## Asian film festival a platform for women

G. Allen Johnson

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The day before the Academy Awards, they gave out the Independent Spirit Awards - supposedly honoring the best in independent, non-Hollywood fare.

The big winner: a little low-budget film called "Silver Linings Playbook," directed by the unknown David O. Russell and starring up-and-comers Robert De Niro, Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence.

OK, a little sarcasm there. But seriously, when Hollywood films are masquerading as indie films, what's a true indie filmmaker to do? And what if you're a woman? Only 9 percent of the top 250 films at the box office last year were made by women. (Just a reminder: Women make up 50 percent of the population.)

"It's getting easier to make films, but it's getting tougher to find distribution for them - I think that's the reality of what's happening in cinema these days," said writer-director Deepa Mehta, whose latest film, "Midnight's Children," based on Salman Rushdie's novel, plays next Sunday as the centerpiece presentation at this year's CAAMFest, which opens Thursday night.

"To be a working filmmaker? I've always just told the stories I wanted to. I think you have to be extremely proactive."

Several of the films at CAAMFest, formerly called the San Francisco International Asian American Festival, are directed by proactive women, and the approaches four are taking provide clues on how to succeed in the business by really, really trying:

-- Jennifer Phang, who is gradually building a reputation as a maker of low-budget science fiction films, has followed up her feature debut, "Half-Life," which premiered at Sundance in 2008, with a 23-minute short film, "Advantageous," which she is planning to expand into a feature.

-- Christine Kwon, the outgoing managing director of CAAMFest, is taking her case to be a filmmaker directly to the Internet. The second season of her Web series, "Nice Girls Crew," which she writes and produces, will premiere at the festival Saturday.

-- Debbie Lum, whose first feature-length documentary, "Seeking Asian Female," premieres at the festival ahead of its national airing on PBS in May, honed her craft as an editor and as a maker of short films.

-- Peggy Peralta, who emigrated to San Francisco from her native Philippines a decade ago to attend Academy of Art and served time as a film archivist at Monaco Labs, is making a living as a cinematographer. Her documentary "Harana," directed by Benito Bautista, premieres Saturday.

Although they are taking radically different approaches to their film careers, all agree that festivals such as CAAMFest provide a valuable platform to become established. On a larger scale, for example, about 50 percent of the films at Sundance in January were directed by women, compared with 4.4 percent of Hollywood studio movies. Festivals clearly help.

"Our distribution pathway (for 'Half-Life') became the Sundance Channel, iTunes, Amazon, then WolfeVideo released it" on DVD, Phang said. "We basically treated its festival life as its theatrical run to generate whatever excitement we could."

Phang at one point was in talks with theatrical distributors for her tale of family angst and impending world doom shot in her native East Bay, but as so often happens, that fell through. She said her team considered self-distributing the film in theaters but found an eager market awaited online and through video on demand.

### Web-based approach

That's where Kwon is banking on her future success. "Nice Girls Crew," a comedy, is being distributed for free on the Internet - each webisode is less than 10 minutes long, and the first season is on YouTube. So there's no money to be made (the filmmakers are accepting donations), but there's something potentially more valuable: exposure.

The three lead actresses in "Nice Girls Crew" - Lynn Chen, Michelle Krusiec and Sheetal Sheth - are veteran (though still young) actresses who long to show a side of themselves they haven't been able to exploit in their film and television work.

"One way or another, these voices are going to find a platform," Kwon said. "You're seeing this more and more through technological advances. ... On the Web, the stakes are a little bit lower, you can experiment more, you can experiment faster. It's less rigorous than producing a feature-length film.

"For the actors, it's essentially a showcase for them, to show their comedic chops. We gave them a script, but we also gave them a lot of room to improvise, to collaborate."

Season two even features a comedic appearance by Tsai Chin, who has acted with Ingrid Bergman, been in two James Bond movies and was the matriarch in "Joy Luck Club," but here was able to satisfy her itch to do comedy.

Lum, who is married and raising a 4-year-old daughter, spent more than eight years making "Seeking Asian Female," a documentary about an SFO parking attendant, a white man, who has "yellow fever," a preference for dating Asian women. When he gets engaged to a young woman from China, Lum found herself not only making a film, but serving as translator and relationship counselor.

### 'Hardest film to make'

No wonder she felt drained by the experience, although her acceptance at CAAMFest and impending PBS exposure on "Independent Lens" is leading to a renewal.

"This was the hardest film to make," Lum said. "It was so hard it makes me hesitate before jumping into another project. It's really hard to fundraise, and the financing is so competitive these days - there's so many great directors in the documentary world."

Not one to give up, Lum is working on writing feature-length narrative screenplays.

Perhaps the most consistently working filmmaker in the group is Peralta. Without a desire to direct - yet - Peralta is game for shooting anything, honing her professionalism shooting commercials and industrial films and her creativity with lower-paying but more satisfying independent work such as "Harana," which took her back to the Philippines for the documentary on the lost art of serenading, called *harana*.

"Industrial films, corporate work - that's my bread and butter," Peralta said. "That's what pays my bills. But I always make sure I'm involved in passion projects - projects I believe in, projects I love, so my soul is always happy. My advice (to someone trying to make it in film): Just go for it."

Will any of these already successful, independent women achieve the success of a Kathryn Bigelow, the first and only woman to win a directing Oscar? Or a Julia Loktev, who was nominated at this year's Independent Spirit Awards for directing "The Loneliest Planet"? Or a Deepa Mehta, whose work has been admired since the first of her elements trilogy ("Fire," "Earth" and "Water") came out in the mid-1990s?

### Determination pays off

Mira Nair, whose career has been chugging on full steam since 1988's "Salaam Bombay!" was nominated for best foreign-language film, thinks the opportunity is there. Her latest, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," starring Riz Ahmed, Kiefer Sutherland, Kate Hudson and Liev Schreiber, plays as a special presentation at CAAMFest next Sunday.

"Growing up in India, I saw women in places of public importance ever since I was a child," Nair said. "On either side of Mahatma Gandhi, fighting for freedom - and women running the bloody country. You feel that you can be anything you want to be.

"Being a woman can give you access to worlds that you can't have access to as a man. ... But rather than woman or man, it's two things: determination and humility. And don't take no for an answer." {sbox}

### CAAMFest

**What:** The 31st film festival of the Center for Asian American Media, formerly called the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival.

**When:** Thursday through March 24.

**Where:** Various venues in San Francisco and Berkeley.

**Opening night:** "Linsanity," a documentary about basketball player Jeremy Lin, who is from Palo Alto. (See story on Page 19.)

**Closing night:** "Memories to Light: Asian American Home Movies," a public launch of CAAM's home movies initiative.

**Centerpiece presentation:** "Midnight's Children," Deepa Mehta's adaptation of Salman Rushdie's classic novel. (See synopsis on Page 18.)

**Retrospective:** Singapore director Royston Tan.

**What's new:** With the name change, CAAMFest is not just a film festival (which is incorporating a new venue, the classic Great Star in Chinatown), but also a music festival (events include a concert at Rickshaw Stop headlined by Dengue Fever) and a food festival (there

are tastings and a special sneak preview of a national PBS program, "Asian Chops").

**Information:** [www.caamedia.org](http://www.caamedia.org).

*G. Allen Johnson is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: [ajohnson@sfgate.com](mailto:ajohnson@sfgate.com) Twitter: @BRfilmsAllen*

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