

“I’ve just finished the dream of my life,” says

first-time feature director Mina Shum. “I was eight years old when I knew I wanted to do something significant in the arts. Well, handling a \$1 million budget would serve as that landmark.” Shum is reflecting on the wrap of *Double Happiness*, written and directed by herself, and produced by her fledgling company, First Generation Films, with dollars won through the third New Views program, jointly funded by British Columbia Film, Telefilm Canada and the National Film Board.

Fellow B.C. filmmaker Kathy Garneau applied to the second New Views competition in 1991, and although she didn’t win, as a result of entering, she brought her project to the attention of enough people to get the film made through other means. *Tokyo Cowboy*, produced by Lodi Butler and Richard Davies for Once and Future Films, is being distributed by C/FP. Both films can be read as rites of passage for their directors, dealing as they do with the acknowledging and coming to terms with aspects of one’s identity. However, while Shum’s film fits into what is coming to be seen as characteristic of her oeuvre, drawing intimately on personal experience, Garneau, in collaboration with award-winning Vancouver writer Caroline Adderson, continues to play with genre conventions.

*Double Happiness* presents itself as a dramatic outgrowth of Shum’s 1993 festival favourite short film, *Me, Mom and Mona*, which deals with the conflicts experienced by herself and the female members of her family in opposition to her father, who is still entrenched in traditional Chinese ways. Another short film, *Hunger*, produced in the same year as part of the Cineworks omnibus film *Breaking Up in Three Minutes*, deals with other aspects of Shum’s personal history. “I have a great need to disclose what I’m going through to an audience. My friends say to me, ‘You’re so willing to admit that you’re completely vulnerable,’ and I think it’s because in the Chinese culture you’re always trying to save face and trying to prove that you do know.” She adds, “It’s also about being specific, so

# Mina Shum and Kathy Garneau Identification marks

by Alison Vermeec





left, *Double Happiness*: independence and concessions  
right, *Tokyo Cowboy*: challenging genre conventions

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you can be universal. If people can accept me and the characters in my film, then they can accept each other better. That's really important to me, because I spent all my childhood trying to fit in to a square hole when I'm a round peg." This trawling of her personal history has resulted in her characters taking charge of situations. Shum concurs. "That's how I live my life. I think I'm really lucky in that I've always known what I like, and that's why my energy can be so focused. I have specific ways I think the world should be, and ways people should be treated. It's a lot more tolerant than my father's point of view, but it's still something I hold on to. Although, I am a bit concerned, because everything is now becoming my work. Every experience I live I allow myself to live because I know that eventually it might end up in a movie."

This willingness to commit aspects of her private life to film combined with a skill for subtle observation is the strength of *Double Happiness*. The film tells the story of Jade, a 22-year-old aspiring actress living at home in Vancouver with her Chinese family. The narrative revolves around Jade's attempts at independence and the concessions she makes to a family and cultural tradition she feels largely divorced from.

It's a subject evidently and admittedly very close to Shum's heart, and yet she feels uncomfortable with the labels placed upon her now as a Chinese-Canadian filmmaker, and the implied racism and sexism that suggest token funding practices. "I read that I'm the first Chinese-Canadian woman to direct a feature film in Canada and immediately broke down in tears. It sounds so responsible and so like a historical fact. I'm not dead. I never wanted to make films that represent my community, in terms of "this is how Chinese people are," because I don't know how Chinese people are. I know how my family is and what my experiences are. Nobody takes into account that I trained to do this. Some people think that maybe it's the fad of the week - *The Wedding Banquet* did really well - so maybe that's why I won New Views. But it wasn't an accident. I've been doing this for a long time."

It's not that Shum is attempting to distance herself from her Chinese-Canadian background, but she is determined to tackle the matter on all fronts. "It's a two-fold thing for a woman who is being asked to be representative of a culture. I am supposed to be damn hum-



ble and gracious. But at the same time, I know I'm Chinese and I don't deny that. That's part of who I am. But I would love to direct anybody's story. At that point, I think we will have some sort of equality."

Shum and Garneau both graduated from the University of British Columbia's film school with their post-graduate diplomas. Shum's BA was from the theatre department, while Garneau's BSc was in chemical engineering. While at UBC, Garneau made her first short film, *Amelia Earhart Found Alive*, and the documentary, *Rules For Romance*, both of which made their mark on the Canadian festival circuit.

Her eclectic style has now been put to work in her debut feature, *Tokyo Cowboy*. Caroline Adderson, whose book of short stories, *Bad Imaginings*, was published to wide acclaim last year, wrote the screenplay as part of a continuing collaborative relationship with her friend Garneau. The two have been in the habit of exchanging ideas and having input into each other's work. Garneau sees this collaboration as an important process in the evolution of their work. They worked together on *Tokyo Cowboy* from the outset. Garneau elaborates. "A couple of years ago, BC Film was having its second New Views contest, and one month before the deadline, I happened to notice the date on the deadline and told Caroline right away. I said, "Here's our big chance. If you can write an amazing screenplay in a month, we may get \$500,000 to make our first feature."

The project was short listed but ultimately lost out to David Hauka and Raymond Massey's *Impolite*. However, as a result of entering, the project obtained a profile. Adderson received a writing apprenticeship and Garneau was taken on as Director Observer on *Impolite*, her first time on the set of a large production. In the meantime, the script was going through changes. Eventually, the script came to the attention of producers Butler and Davis. The experience these seasoned professionals brought to bear resulted in a distribution deal with C/FP.

The film is the story of No, a Japanese man who has come to Western Canada in search of his childhood pen pal who



he believes can initiate him in the ways of the Wild West. One is lulled into seeing the film as a genre piece, and indeed an earlier working title for the film, *Five Steps West*, serves to highlight the steps a man must master in order to be a real cowboy. The film is more interesting than that, however, and sets up a number of competing romances that drive the narrative: between No and the West; between No and his pen pal, Kate; and the most interesting one, between No, Kate and Kate's partner, Shelley. An interesting switch takes place, transforming the film from a genre piece to one that challenges genre conventions, making the cinematic role reversals all the more surprising and effective. After carefully setting up certain expectations, the film turns them on their head. "Part of the whole thing of identifying with cowboys and western movies is identifying with a macho culture, and No realizes

that he is taking on a fake persona," says Garneau. "The film is about identity, about finding out who we are and then acknowledging who we are."

Garneau is currently at work on a documentary with Telefilm broadcast funding. Called *Chore Wars*, it deals with the thorny issue of the different gender approaches to housework. Last year, Mina Shum won a place on Studio D's New Initiatives in Film professional development program, which she put on hold to do *Double Happiness*. She hopes to re-start the program later this year with a film called *Inventory*, a personal diary film that will take stock of her life to date with an item-by-item account of its every element, right down to "counting how many pairs of socks I own!" ●

*Alison Vermeé is the Canadian Images Programmer at the Vancouver International Film Festival.*

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# Kathy Garneau

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