

"It was great. I felt like a general at war." Vancouver director Mina Shum—who brought us the much-praised comedy *Double Happiness*—is audibly excited as she recalls shooting the car-chase sequence in her latest film, *Drive, She Said*. Straight-laced Nadine (Moirira Kelly) and her captor-cum-lover Tass (Josh Hamilton) are on the run, pursued by an indefatigable motorcycle cop. In panic, Nadine grabs Tass's gun and starts spraying bullets like a Peckinpah wannabe. The action spreads wide to fill the anamorphic screen while the camera spirals earthbound from above, like a one-winged bird.



Photos courtesy of Behaviour Distribution

Josh Hamilton and Moira Kelly in *Drive, She Said*

Mina Shum



Shum is not headed for a career in action movies; she's simply relishing "stepping out on a limb." The technical challenges are mentioned casually, with a nod to the difficulties of working with an overall production budget of about \$2 million, but the real charge for her comes from something else. "It's so good to be able to do something different. It was a real rush to be able to step out of a traditional female director's role and do something that is very testosterone driven." The comment is consistent with the three principles that guide the filmmaker through thick and thin: she is forever noting the good things in life, she's a creative adventurer and she lives to defy labels.

Born in China, Shum came to Canada at nine months and found out at an early age that an armour of solid optimism diminished the effects of alienation and that sexist and racial labels made her "fight." As far back as she can recall, she's always felt she could look down the dark side of a tunnel, but has chosen not to. "I was told all my life: 'You just don't see Chinese women sitting in a director's chair.'" With slight contempt, she lists off the "appropriate" careers: pharmacist, teacher, doctor. "The way I answered all that negativity was to believe that, in the end, I will be satisfied; I will achieve happiness. I knew the path to this was humour."

A good deal of inspiration came from her parents, who struggled with assimilation. "Move a Chinese family to Canada when they don't speak any English and they're poor, that's pretty absurd. You have to laugh at the difficulties." Thirty-odd years later, post-*Double Happiness*, Shum was a hot new talent. She "did the L.A. thing. You know, I got an agent, I got a lawyer, I had meetings." She laughs. "I never found anything I wanted to do there and I'm

On

By Pamela Cuthbert

Drives

glad to be home and doing what I do. Any club that wants me to join, I don't want to join." That includes the club of Canadian filmmakers—at least on the marquee. If Shum has her way, *Drive, She Said* will be labelled an "independent" film and nothing more. "Although I'm proud of my personal identity and I'm proud that it's a Canadian film, the best way to make sure people see it without prejudice is to say it's an independent film."

She credits her mother with instilling in her an unshakable confidence that she can do just about anything. As a teenager, she explored a few of her dreams: she sang in a band, worked in the theatre, photographed concerts for a living and, partly inspired by Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*, she found her way to filmmaking. And for now, she's devoted. "There's something about stepping into a movie that allows you to find yourself because you get to role-play and in role-playing you get to be more yourself more than you would in daily interaction."

Although drawing is an unrewarding experience for her, Shum storyboards her films from beginning to end. "The way I approach a film is to try to bring out stylistically, visually, the emotional core of the story. I can look at a shot in the film and with the colours and the composition, I know I can tell the story without dialogue." In the director's notes for *Drive, She Said*, the cinematic influences are listed as Hitchcock, Truffaut and the great American westerns. What's the connection? There are two, she says. One is to place ordinary people in extraordinary situations, and the other is to see those people rebel against established beliefs or traditions. The inspiration for the story, in part, stemmed from what the director sees as a long-standing shortage of women heroes in movies; she felt now was the time to



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make a statement "partly because we're going to the end of the millennium, I wanted to say, well, things have changed a little; we have the ability to make choices now that 100 years ago we didn't."

The young heroine of *Drive, She Said*, Nadine, is at a crossroads. Gradually winding herself into neurotic knots, bored by her emotionally stagnant but well-intentioned boyfriend (Jonathan Evans) and stifled by their dull lives (working as clerks at the local bank), she seeks escape. Her saviour, a mysterious mechanic named Tass, comes to town, robs the bank and takes her hostage. From there, it's a road movie; a voyage of discovery as the unlikely couple finds true love and Nadine finds herself. "It's about finding the courage to not know about your future, which is something common to most people; but I think for women it's particularly difficult because we've been taught to love and cherish stability."

As with *Double Happiness*, in which a young woman (Sandra Oh) pushes against her Chinese parents and their expectations that she will marry a Chinese man, Shum draws from her own history. After a broken marriage and what she calls "a few relationships," it took years of soul-searching before she settled into her own skin. "You have to find out who you are before you can actually be in a relationship—if it's going to work anyway," she advises. Shum was thinking of *North by Northwest* when she decided to send Nadine on the run with Tass. "In a way, she steps into a looking glass. That's how we talked about it when we were shooting it; she's almost entered into a movie."

The director had her own movie experience this autumn, a kind of horror flick, actually, when *Drive, She Said* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival to disappointed audiences and negative reviews. The notorious "sophomoric curse"—the great threat for the filmmaker who has made a splash the first time out—is the last thing we talk about this mid-January afternoon. Sensing that Shum is far from shy and aware that she has spoken openly about what she calls "the jinx," I nonetheless bring up the subject with caution. The tape runs another 15 minutes as she winds her

way through myriad arguments and experiences since the fall. "Guy Maddin said that what you're fighting against with your second film is the imagined film of your fans. I never thought of that until I got to Toronto and I realized: 'Oh, my god, they've been waiting for something else.' That hit hard."

She carries on her own conversation for a couple of minutes, reasoning that *Drive, She Said* is less accessible and then, unprompted, explains why. "I'm very removed, camera-wise, deliberately, because Nadine's life is static. It's a different choice. To me, some of the stuff (in *Drive, She Said*) is far more experimental." The justification is over; the rest of the discussion blurs the time since the premiere into one necessary passage that is thankfully over. She jokes: if she hadn't made a film people liked, no one would care about her second movie. Eternally the optimist, Shum argues that although the experience "was a very bad situation" she turned to Steve Hegyes, the producer, at the festival and said: "This will never happen to us again. There will be no expectation of the third one, I'll just be making my next film."

The third one is in the works. *Fry Girl*, the story of a teenage girl who wins a contest as best fryer at a fast-food chain, is based on Shum's own story. At age 16, she worked at McDonald's and entered a contest for the best hostess title. She won and, as she tells it with a note of proud defiance, the multinational conglomerate provided a means for the punky Clash fan to make it to London to see Strummer and the boys in concert.

The project has taken on a new direction since the making of *Drive, She Said*. Choreographing the action sequences in that film—the ones that made her feel so virile—also gave way to the confidence she needed to create musical sequences for *Fry Girl*. "I wouldn't have come up with *Fry Girl* if it wasn't for *Drive*. Now, is there any way to prevent yourself from reacting from one to the next? If *Drive* is a reaction to *Double Happiness*, then *Fry Girl* is a reaction to both of those films and it will just keep going." She pauses and starts to laugh at the impossibly analytical corner she's backed herself into. "All I can say is that *Fry Girl* is going to be a very different film (from the others) and I don't know what to do about it. Maybe nothing, right?" Right. ■