

Interview with Mina Shum: The Director's Question

Miya Davar

Mina Shum is exuberant, eloquent, and 5'3". Her presence extends far beyond the bounds of her stature, however. Born in Hong Kong and raised in Vancouver, often pigeonholed as the "Chinese-Canadian Woman film director," Shum makes films that are universal questions. Her three features *Double Happiness*, *Drive*, *She Said*, and *Long Life, Happiness, and Prosperity* are about windows into lives we might otherwise not see, the magic around us if we look for it, and a search for the way to live. Shum graced the UBC campus from 1983-1989, receiving a Theatre degree and a Diploma in Film Production. Her first film, *Double Happiness*, won international acclaim and several awards. We meet at the Laughing Bean on a sunlit afternoon and I receive a glimpse into the world of Shum...

Myia: You write, direct, produce, act, write and perform music, and you've created an art installation. Why do you choose film as your artistic expression?

Mina: I was 19 when I decided I wanted to get into film. I saw a film called *Gallipoli* by Peter Weir. It was centered around a friendship between two men, and I realized one, they all had funny accents, so you could make a film that wasn't American-centric you could actually find an audience and two, you could marry beautiful visuals with a very intimate story. It just never occurred to me, because I thought I was going to be a theatre director. I just went eureka! (...) In the last 3 years of my Theatre degree I tried to get into the film program and I kept getting rejected (laughs). But I was a punker in the late eighties and a woman and I didn't and still don't want to change who I am. I want the industry to change. So I just kept going back. (In) my first application to the UBC film program I cut out ransom letters like out of magazines: LET ME IN YOUR FILM PROGRAM. I thought I was being creative and they thought I was kind of dangerous. (laughs) And even when I was in film school my projects never got voted to be made. But I made them anyway, and then I came out of UBC with a grant from the Canada Council just because I just did it. That was 15 years ago and I still think that chutzpah is what gets me through the day now. That kind of, "I know you're fantasizing about this crazy movie that no one will ever allow you do if you ask permission, so just do it, don't ask permission."

Myia: So for you film can marry all of these things?

Mina: Yeah, music, sound design and storytelling. I like the idea of being transported. When I go to a movie, I'm taken on vacation, either emotionally or literally. There's not too many art forms that can do that so inclusively, that speak to everybody. The language of cinema, narrative, tends to speak to almost everybody, and is so all-encompassing. (...) It just is funny, I didn't know I was going to be a director. When I look back, it feels like I was training for it my whole life.



Myia: Do you try to put forth an agenda of multiculturalism, feminism, and immigrant identity, or are these more organic results?

Mina: I think every film is a question, a question I'm having about how to live my life, and you're also revealing something. Especially since I write comedies and comedies are rooted in tragedy. (...) When you're pushing those buttons with yourself as a creator, you're pushing those buttons for the audience. So (these questions and answers) may be called feminism or multiculturalism, but to me it's all about HOW DO WE LIVE? In a world that's changing constantly, I'm always trying to figure out a way to entertain and enlighten, and that's for myself as well. (...) Because I'm a living breathing human being in Vancouver, which is a very multicultural city, and I'm a woman, I tend to get tagged as someone who might write about "issues." But that's not where it starts for me, it starts on a very human level. I use narrative to reveal things that people don't see. I'm hoping to show that normal is a variable thing. For me, how to achieve happiness and what is defined as normal are parallel questions.

Myia: *Double Happiness* and *Long Life, Happiness, and Prosperity* centre around Chinese-Canadian families, and the films also seem to be navigating the hyphen between Chinese and Canadian. To you, how is personal identity defined by physical appearance and family expectations?

Mina: I think (finding identity) is a universal struggle. (...) So much of my personal identity according to others has to do with the way I look. I think I'm always trying to thwart people's perceptions of me for that reason. I've had people phone my agent and say, "Oh, Mina Shum. She doesn't speak English, does she?" And it's like, "have you really looked at my movies? Because most of them are in English." (...) I think family ultimately has a grave effect on your personal identity. They're your first mirror. (...) They're your first sense of safety and home, so depending on how

functional they are, you bring those preconceptions into how you relate with other people. (...) I think that physical presence is that way people deal with you but I think your family is the way you relate to the world.

Myia: What do you want to show about Vancouver in your work?

Mina: I think it's beautiful (laughs). I think it's a very poetic city. I shoot a lot on the industrial waterfront here because on a very simple graphic level, it is humanity contextualized. We are so small and the world is so big and yet we try. So I love setting things in this city. I also love that this city is so open compared to a lot of places. It's almost like, we don't mind if you're a freak, we like that, so I always want to show the diversity that's here.

Myia: *Double Happiness* seems to be more self-reflexive, whereas *Drive, She Said* and *Long Life, Happiness, and Prosperity* are more conventional narrative. Why did you choose the narrative form that you did for *Double Happiness*?

Mina: I realized I was making one of the first works. It's a very small story, a Chinese girl trying to decide if she wants to move out. I realized I needed to let the characters confront the audience directly, so that there were no bones about what her (Jade's) voice was. There was no "us" filling in the blanks in terms of who they are, and I wanted to show a very strong woman. So she's talking to the camera directly, and even the father and mother and sister do that later. It shows a certain strength that Chinese people aren't known for. The cliché is that we're quiet, so I wanted to kind of break that by choosing a self-reflexive form. Mind you, now there's all these shows on tv and that's all they do now, so it's not even interesting anymore. (laughs)

Myia: How autobiographical was "Double Happiness," or was it at all?

Mina: I called it semi-autobiographical, more truth than fact. What I wanted to do was make a movie for me when I moved out because there was nobody telling me it was okay. I wanted to reach out to that girl who was 18 and so scared. (...) In fact, many kids moved out because of my damn movie! (laughs). (...) Someone just asked me yesterday, "are families as traditional now?" It's like, well maybe not quite as traditional as that story was, it was exaggerated for cinema, but there's still stuff to be mined out of that restrictive (relationship).

Myia: The scene with Jade running through the empty industrial space was really powerful in drawing in the viewer to her trapped state. How did you decide on the combination of music, action, etc.?

Mina: When I was shooting the movie, both producers sat me down, Steve Hedges was a UBC grad, and said, "where do you see the third act climax?" I said, "Well, she

runs." And on the script it's like, "She Runs". (laughs) That's all, it's not described any deeper than that, because if I did my job as a director and as a storyteller, the pressure cooker is so tight at that point that she has no choice but to run... the physical action showed how trapped she was. And the music we ended up with, the Sonic Youth song in the movie, was what we played when she ran. I played Sandra three Sonic Youth songs and I said, "Which one motivates you most?" And she picked one and I said, "okay, that's it."

Myia: In *Drive, She Said*, the characters of Sloan and Chen seemed to be playing with a lot like gender, ethnicity, and stereotypes. What is the scene in which we are introduced to them about?

Mina: (...) I wanted to give the characters of Nadine and Tass a place where they could shed their own baggage. So Sloan and Chen had to be so completely without baggage and self-reflexive that they could role-play, and we still don't know by the end of the movie which one's the male and which one's the female, I hope. We go to the Chinese-Canadian restaurant and we have certain assumptions. It's kind of nice that they're (Sloan and Chen) kind of weird and kinky and we're not quite sure what's going to happen next. Because of that it loosens Tass and Nadine up to be able to actually admit that they like each other. So I was trying to create a fantastical, surreal haven for the two leads.

Myia: Your films seem to have an overall sense of whimsy. By incorporating the use of magic by a child, how does this add to the exploration of themes in the *Long Life, Happiness, and Prosperity*?

Mina: The film was about how does one keep faith in a difficult world? I wanted to instill in people a sense of hope. If you can believe, then there's hope. It's as simple as that. If the film was about keeping faith in a difficult world, then Mindy being a kid, most people don't believe kids when they do anything. She was the perfect catalyst to try these charms and as an audience member you're not sure if they worked or not. And it's her belief ultimately that saves her at the end. Kin (Sandra Oh's character) believing in her daughter was redemption. I was exploring ideas of faith, partly because I got into researching Chinese religion (...) and so I wanted to kind of instill the story with that. (...) (Chinese religions) leave room for your own personality and interpretation within a religion, so I kind of wanted to explore that just for myself. (The film is) a hodgepodge of everything really, so now what do I believe in? EVERYTHING. (laughs). I think it's better than believing in nothing, so...

Myia: What is feminism for you?

Mina: I have these simple rules for my own life. I've had questions constantly peering their heads, and the answers are always evolving. For me, feminism is: I can do anything that anyone else can do. And that's cross-gender, cross-

race, cross-height. (laughs) It's funny because one of my mentors in life, she's always saying to me, "You have such a sense of entitlement." And it's amazing because I came up from this very working-class, non-privileged minority family and she goes "Where did you get it from?" And I just go well "If you just think you can do it, you can do it." And I think that's what feminism is. If you can own that attitude, then you're free. You don't have to keep checking in with feminist doctrine, you just do it, you are entitled. (...) If you can just build the confidence to do that, that will make a very big dent in the next generation.

Myia: What projects are you working on right now?

Mina: I'm working on my great fantasy project! I'm working with Steve Hedges who I worked with on *Double Happiness*, who was a year ahead of me at UBC. (...) I think we are in a climate of not promoting the original story now, we want to take books or video games or newspaper articles and make movies from them, we don't want to take a chance on a fresh new idea. So I'm really excited that I have a fresh new idea that people actually seem interested in. It's called *The Immortal Immigrants*. It's about a family of Chinese fighting immortal immigrants who have been alive for 600 years and now they're hiding out in Vancouver present-day running a Chinese restaurant. And the 21 year old Ling who's immortal is tired of living with her family and tired of being immortal and wants her own life, and yet at the same time they're hiding from an arch-nemesis the whole time and they're dealing with racism and society's expectations and they're trying to fit into the Chinese community and she just wants to date a mortal. She thinks the skateboard guy is really cute. (laughs) (...) This is about trying to find a definition of family and home and trusting. (...) I think it's a really timely movie.

Myia: How has your experience been as a working filmmaker in BC?

Mina: I feel very lucky that there is work here, but at the same time it's pulling away. The Hollywood industry is becoming very protective of its business so a lot of productions are staying in LA, so we'll see how long it lasts. (...) As a filmmaker I'm concerned because there was a real trend towards basically grabbing American movie stars and putting them in Canadian movies and only making movies that had a video game attached or a book that already had sold a million copies. Where would the fresh film come from if there are those restrictions? There's other stories out there that haven't been told yet by young filmmakers who are still finding their voice. Without Canadian filmmakers who are risking their pain to tell us their story, we're not being truly reflective to ourselves, we're only watching American things reflecting us. To really create an identity, it has to be us telling our particular stories in our particular ways. ☺