



Check out 'Asian Stories' this weekend

ASIAN STORIES (BOOK III)

Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Fest
7 p.m. Sunday
Directors Guild of America
7920 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood
Ticket information: (213)
680-4462, Ext. 58
Or visit www.vconline.org

How this film was made. Page 5

By VERNOR RODGERS
STAFF WRITER

Coming soon to a theater near you (as if we really want them): Remakes of "The Poseidon Adventure" and "The Omen."

Or, you could attend The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Fest now through May 11. Specifically, on Sunday a funny and touching film,

"Asian Stories (Book III)," will be shown as part of the festival.

Film festivals really can put Hollywood to shame. While the big movie companies crank out rehashed stuff, smaller, independent filmmakers have a chance in these festivals to display their creativity and originality.

A product of El Monte-based Flixfactory, "Asian Stories (Book III)" was written by Ronald Oda and co-directed by Oda and Kris Chin.

Oda and Chin for years lamented the poor quality of movies they had to view, so they decided to make films of their own. According to Chin, who also serves as producer, "Asian Stories" is a movie that reflects their Asian-American heritage. He said there are jokes that are not told outside their ethnic circles, so they decided to bring them out, even if they may not be politically correct.

Although the main characters

are Asian, the film is very American in nature.

"Asian Stories" is about Jim Lee (James Kyson Lee), a very cheap Chinese American — the kind of guy who calculates how much tip he should leave, and at the lowest recommended percentage.

About a week before he is to wed on Valentine's Day, Jim's fiancée, Katherine, dumps him, and even steals his collection of Depeche Mode CDs. After moping around and getting drunk on champagne, Jim concludes he cannot live with the pain and asks his best friend, an ex-con named Alex (Kirt Kishita), to kill him. Alex eventually reluctantly agrees, but says he cannot do the deed in L.A. He suggests they go to a cabin in the mountains owned by Jim's aunt.

Jim also sets up his own conditions: Alex cannot let Jim know when he going to kill him, but it must be done before Valentine's Day, six days away.

Thus "Asian Stories" becomes a variation on the buddy road-trip theme, *a la* "Sideways." Alex becomes something of an entertainment director, prodding the somber Jim to hit a bar, and go on a

bike trip, both ideas ending badly for Jim.

One morning Alex and Jim have breakfast at a local diner and meet Amanda (Kathy Uyen). Naturally, Jim tips cheaply but Alex surreptitiously leaves an extra \$20.

Alex, however, has other items on his agenda, and soon Jim, like Paul Giamatti's Miles in "Sideways," is on his own as Alex disappears for hours at a time.

Meanwhile, Jim begins to see the folly of his cheapskate ways. After all, he is going to be dead soon, so why horde his money? Also, his friend Alex is fond of saying, "Good tips lead to good karma." So Jim withdraws about \$11,000 and begins spending freely.

He then witnesses the brutal breakup of Amanda and her boyfriend, who she catches with another woman.

Soon Jim and Amanda are together. She invites him to her home, where he discovers she also is an artist and owns an adorable dog named Kalbi.

Through Amanda, a woman with a positive outlook despite a violent upbringing, Jim discovers his life is not over. But there is the problem of Alex. As Valentine's Day arrives, Jim now is in super-alert mode, hoping to stop Alex from killing him.

To deliver a synopsis does not do justice to this movie. The script is witty and cringingly realistic. The characters grow on you, especially Alex and Amanda. Alex is basically a screwup, a man with a good heart but bad plans. Amanda manages to bounce off her travesties by saying she has too much to do to be bitter about life. And she warns Jim never to anger her. Why? Because I'm Korean, she says, staring him down.

Jim, however, anchors the movie as a man who must deal with the personality quirks that led him to be abandoned by his fiancée. He considers himself a practical man rather than a dreamer, like Alex, or an artist, like Amanda. In one scene, Amanda talks Jim into writing haiku. He does, and it is brutal

— and Amanda stares at him in disbelief.

There are other quirky characters in the film, notably a pizza delivery guy (Eric Hailey), who befriends the reborn and generous Jim and tells Jim to wear the Ju-Ju — a sort of necklace — for good luck. At the right time, Jim does, and the advice proves fruitful.

"Asian Stories (Book III)" proves that it is not a big budget that can make a film endearing. It takes a commitment to a story and its characters, and the skill to convey them so that the viewers care for them.

vernor.rodgers@sgvn.com
(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2145



San Gabriel Valley-based film wins spot in L.A. festival

Visual Communications (VC) Film Festival

Tonight through May 11.
"Asian Stories (Book 3)"
6:45 p.m. Sunday
Director's Guild of America
7920 Sunset Blvd.
Los Angeles
\$8
www.vconline.org
www.asianstoriesmovie.com

Read the Vernor Rodgers review of this film. Page 2

BY JACKIE JOU
CORRESPONDENT

Kris Chin and Ron Oda said they have had no filmmaking experience.

"We learned about filmmaking using 'Filmmaking for Dummies' (book) and going to Borders" for research, said Oda, 38.

Yet they have been invited to be part of a festival devoted to Asian-American films. The Visual Communications Film Festival in Los Angeles will show their film, 'Asian Stories (Book 3)' on Sunday.

The film is the culmination of a two-year collaboration by the two; it was ultimately produced at the El Monte-based Flixfactory. But the idea for the movie has been around a lot longer than that.

"I have a stack of notebooks with things that I've written, jokes that I've pulled for the past 10 years, Oda said. "I used a lot of the stuff during the eight months when I was writing the script."

Oda and Chin, 37, are both USC alumni.

"I lived in the San Gabriel Valley my whole life," Oda said. "About 80 percent of the movie was filmed in the San



PHOTO BY LEO JARZOMB / STAFF
Flix Factory film editor Katz Ueno, left, and producer Kris Chin in their El Monte editing room.

Gabriel Valley. The jokes, the locations that we use for the movie, are all things from my childhood.

"Because I grew up in San Dimas, I got a broad view of different cultures and races," he said.

Their goal was to create a new genre in storytelling rooted in the Asian-American world.

"Currently, there's not much variety in Asian-American movies," Chin said. "They're usually historical or have typical Asian gangsters."

They describe their film as a "dramedy," a combination drama and comedy.

"There is a market and a demand for Asian-American humor," Chin said. "As Asian-Americans, we have jokes and lifestyles different from the mainstream. We use jokes in the movie that most Asians are familiar with."

The central character of the movie is based on Chin's friend Jim, who like the eponymous character, was dumped by his fiancée two weeks before the wedding.

"We've been telling Jim for

years that we'll make a movie about him and we finally did," Chin said.

"We wanted to make a movie that was honest. We can't make a movie about something we know nothing about," he said. "We all know of somebody who has had his or her heart broken and who has been deeply depressed afterwards."

In the movie, Jim (James Kyson Lee) implores his best friend, a chain-smoking ex-con named Alex (Kirt Kishita) to kill him before Valentine's Day. In the meantime, the friends run into some quirky characters, and a new love interest appears.

People who have seen the movie so far say they like the Alex character the best.

Kishita is not "usually an actor," Oda said. "He's my cousin and I wrote the role especially for him. I exaggerated parts of Kirt's personality."

For example, Alex threatens people while cooking them elaborate delicacies.

They called the movie 'Book 3' "because have you seen

'Star Wars'? 'Star Wars' started out with episode 3," Chin said.

"The number four is bad luck for Asians," he added. "It means death. We want to make Books 1 and 2 and focus more on the character of Alex. We just need to get more money first."

The VC festival, also known

as The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, starts tonight and continues through May 11. It will feature 140 films, shorts and videos with an unprecedented 16 features from 18 Asian-American filmmakers. After the screening of "Asian Stories (Book 3)" there will be a reception with the cast and crew.