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Equal Opportunity Comedy

By LYNDA LIN

PHOTOS COURTESY FLIX FACTORY

A few years ago Ron Oda, a self-proclaimed “serial entrepreneur” with several businesses including a Los Angeles auto shop, dropped everything to make a film. The removal of a benign tumor on his 11th cranial nerve in 2005 changed his perspective on life.

Oda, 39, and his college friend Kris Chin had been talking about making a movie for 15 years, but they were always working on other projects.

“After [the operation], I thought, ‘I had a brain tumor, why not?’” joked Oda, a Shin Nisei. “It was a real lesson on mortality. I guess it was a blessing.”

He spent the next eight months writing and using real life situations as inspiration for “Asian Stories, (Book 3),” a dark comedy about a tight-fisted Chinese American (James Kyson Lee) whose fiancée of five years leaves him for their Filipino American wedding deejay. From there, drama happens. Lee’s character asks his ex-con best friend (Kirt Kishita) to kill him.

In the film, heavy issues are wrapped in irreverent humor. In one seminal scene, Kishita interrupts his own thoughts about death methods to rant about his favorite food item

being discontinued at Trader Joe's, a retail grocery store. The dialogue is sharp with impeccable comedic timing ("Remember when you almost drowned in that pool in Gardena?" says Kishita while fishing).

But there's real life irony.

Oda has never written anything before. He graduated from the University of Southern California as a business major and schooled himself at a Borders bookstore with "Filmmaking for Dummies."

"One day Kris bought this video camera. We went to a metro rail station — you know how they always shoot stuff in train stations ... we edited the footage together, put some music over it and then said. 'I think we're ready for a movie now,'" said Oda with a laugh.

"We just thought what do we have to lose? We're nobodies anyway!"

Cruisin' with the Comedy

In late July 2005, they started their 24-day shoot with a \$70,000 budget that inflated well into the red. Their goal was to make an entertaining Asian Pacific American film.

Oda grew tired of the APA community's penchant to rehash historical and experimental (read: unwatchable) films.



Writer/director Ron Oda's brain surgery made him lose his voice during filming.

"Can you guys do something else? We want to provide entertainment that people can enjoy," he said. "Here's something that's different, not an internment camp movie."

To plot his journey into filmmaking, he relied on the transcending powers of comedy.

"Comedy can overcome a lot of things. It gets the stereotypes out," said Oda, adding that many of the APA characters in television and movies are just too serious.

Then you have comedic characters like Kishita's, and you're just "cruising with them."

Kishita, a former baseball player for the University of Arizona and the minor leagues, steals every scene with his charisma and onscreen appeal. He is also Oda's cousin.

"I told him if I ever make a movie I would put him in it," said Oda. "Everybody thought we were nuts."

The film, which has won numerous awards while touring film festivals, has also launched several careers. Kishita has just been signed by a major talent agency and Lee can be seen every week on NBC's hit television show "Heroes."

"I just always saw this movie as a launching pad for all this talent that gets suppressed in the mainstream," said Oda.

The inspiration for the film came from Chin's friend, who was jilted by his bride-to-be.

"It was like a comedy. After doing it for two years, we were like, 'Dude, get over it,'" said Oda.

Justin Lin and the Overly Critical Asians

What's a hit film without some controversy? The internet has been abuzz with negative reviews and criticism of the film's negative portrayal of races. Case in point, a Raiders-clad Latino man spews more "esses" and "holmes" than a "Cheech and Chong" movie.

Asians are overly politically correct and extremely critical of their own, said Oda. "Comedy is comedy. We wrote the script to pick at everyone."

At his auto shop, workers exchange off color remarks while hovering over revving engines.

"To me that's a daily thing. You never see a Latino and an Asian arguing [in films]. It's always a white guy and black guy," Oda added. The Hollywood setup has no room for cross-cultural conflict.

At a recent film festival in San Diego, Oda met the APA film community's golden child, Justin Lin, who talked about moving beyond just throwing blind support behind APA films.

"It has to be good. I would say go support the movie because it's good, not because it's Asian," said Oda.

Now Oda is working on two other scripts and percolating ideas for a prequel to "Asian Stories" — Books 1-2 don't exist yet.

And of course, if it sucks, you don't have to watch it.

[For more info: www.asianstoriesmovie.com](http://www.asianstoriesmovie.com)

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