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new **VOICES**

RADIUM CHEUNG, HKSC, ON HIS CRAZILY CREATIVE IPHONE-5S
CAPTURE FOR THE SENSATIONAL STREET DRAMA, *TANGERINE*

by David Geffner / photos courtesy of Radium Cheung / Magnolia Pictures

EVEN THOUGH RADIUM CHEUNG, HKSC, HAD A “WONDERFULLY SATISFYING” EXPERIENCE SHOOTING WRITER/DIRECTOR SEAN BAKER’S MUCH LAUDED INDIE FEATURE, *STARLET*, THREE YEARS AGO, THE NEW YORK-BASED GUILD SHOOTER SAYS HE “ALMOST HUNG UP” WHEN BAKER CALLED FROM L.A. WANTING CHEUNG TO CO-DP HIS NEXT MOVIE ENTIRELY ON AN IPHONE. THE FORMER GAFFER (WHOSE CREDITS INCLUDE PAST SUNDANCE HITS LIKE *ALL IS LOST*, *MARGIN CALL*, AND *BLUE VALENTINE*) WOULD HAVE TO TAKE TIME OFF FROM HIS STEADY GIG – SHOOTING TANDEM UNIT ON FX’S *THE AMERICANS* WITH MAIN DP RICHARD RUTOWSKI – TO HEAD OUT TO L.A. FOR A PROJECT THAT WAS SO BUDGET-CHALLENGED, IT COULD NOT AFFORD A REAL CAMERA SYSTEM. “OBVIOUSLY I HAD HESITATIONS,” CHEUNG LAUGHS. “WE ALL DID. BUT SEAN HAD DONE SO MUCH RESEARCH AND PREPARATION [INTO USING MOBILE PHONES], AND THE TWO OF US ARE SUCH A CREATIVE FIT – LIKE TWO MUSICIANS IN HARMONY – THAT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER WE’D MAKE IT WORK.”

TANGERINE’S STORYLINE PROVED TO BE A PERFECT FIT AS WELL FOR THE IPHONE 5S WORKFLOW. KIKI KITANA RODRIGUEZ AND MYA TAYLOR (BOTH NON-ACTORS) STAR AS A PAIR OF TRANSGENDER PROSTITUTES UNLEASHED ON THE STREETS OF HOLLYWOOD ON CHRISTMAS EVE. RODRIGUEZ’S CHARACTER IS HELL-BENT ON FINDING HER PIMP/LOVER, WHO CHEATED ON HER WHILE SHE WAS IN JAIL. WIDE-ANGLE “WALK-AND-TALKS” DOMINATE AS THE GIRLS TRAIPISE THROUGH A MENAGERIE OF LOCATIONS AND LIGHTING CONDITIONS – BRIGHT SUNSHINE, BARELY LIT HOTEL ROOMS, DONUT SHOPS SCREAMING WITH FLUORESCENTS, AND BOTH SODIUM-VAPOR AND LED STREETLIGHTS AS THE ACTION BUILDS TO A FURIOUS (AND FUNNY) CRESCENDO BY NIGHTFALL. FAR FROM THE HAPHAZARD, CINEMA VÉRITÉ ONE MIGHT EXPECT, *TANGERINE* IS COHESIVE, NUANCED AND A VISUAL TOUR-DE-FORCE IN MANY WAYS, GIVEN THE SEAMLESS BLENDING OF TECHNOLOGY AND NARRATIVE.

ICG: Was this your first time at Sundance? Cheung: Yes, as a cinematographer and a co-producer. But *Tangerine* was so small, so experimental, shot with a few mobile phones, that I had zero expectations going in. I thought if a few people liked it and said it was cool, that would be great.

Audiences loved it, and Magnolia picked it up for a nationwide theatrical release. Many people said it’s what the NEXT section at Sundance should be about: films that take big risks in all areas. Well, we certainly did that. [Laughs.] In many ways, [*Tangerine*] was a similar experience to *Starlet*, in that it was a tiny budget with no stars, and a defined visual sensibility. *Starlet* was much different – drained of color and very low contrast. But it too became a huge critical success. I suppose you could say Sundance has been overwhelming, but in a really good way.

So, the obvious question: why iPhones? There was no other way. I mean, who wants to shoot a movie with a few mobile phones, right? [Laughs.] I think when Sean came

upon this Kickstarter campaign of Moondog Labs, which was developing an anamorphic adaptor for the iPhone 5S, we were convinced it was possible. Sean reached out to Moondog Labs and they got familiar with our past work and knew we were legit. So they gave us three prototypes – one for each mobile phone we had bought. What was interesting was that it’s still at the development stage where each prototype was a little different and not yet standardized, so each time we had to swap between cameras, we had to rebalance the rig.

How does the anamorphic adapter work? It’s a tiny, lightweight tool that clips onto the corner of the phone over the camera’s lens. You have to carefully wipe it down and clean it before clipping it on. With the anamorphic squeeze, you get somewhere in the 22- to 25-millimeter range. That means that for every close-up, the camera is literally three feet away from the subject and you see everything in the background; you can’t compress the image and manipulate depth of field as you might normally do. The anamorphic adapter gave the film a defined and really unique look.



Did you use anything internal in the phone to help control the image? We used an app called Filmic Pro, which locks down three parameters: focus, color temperature and exposure. Before every shot we'd have to point the camera off-frame to let the phone camera self-adjust to a color temperature we saw fit, and lock it. Same with exposure. Once they're locked you can frame anything you want. The app also allowed the camera to record at its highest possible quality, beyond the phone's native compression. The files out of the camera are still compressed — they're not Raw, of course. But I was surprised by how broad the color space was when we did the DI, considering the files are not large at all.

How scary was it for you, as a former gaffer, to have to use existing practicals the entire film? The thing is that

once you understand your story and how you want to tell it, the tools used are only about getting that result. In fact, the only instruments I brought with me from New York were a few Rosco LED LitePads. I had a one-by-one foot, and a six-by-twelve inch, both of which run on batteries, and some color-correcting gels. I only used those to fill-in people's eyes, or to help with a darker-skinned character.

Was that choice also based on budgetary concerns?

Not at all. We could have afforded to rent a few Kinos. It was a conscious choice not to shape the light, which we as DPs always do, and to embrace what was there. This story is Sean's signature social realism, so the goal was to *not* introduce artificial movie lighting. We did use practicals strategically — turning them on and off selectively in specific locations — the motel room, [taxi driver] Razmik's



Cinematographer Radium Cheung, HKSC

house, for example – to control the shadows. And because the story is set during Christmas, we shot in and around a lot of bright, colorful lighting that really popped, and we even boosted that a little in post. Basically the approach was to refrain from bringing in lighting instruments and give the actors all the physical space they deserve, because it's their canvas.

The action was really smooth. How did you handhold the iPhones? We used this small gimbal-balanced rig from Steadicam called Smoothee. The iPhone is so light and thin that no matter how steady you hold it with your hand, it will look like home-movie video capture, which is fine but not the feeling we wanted. Just like a full Steadicam, [using the Smoothee] does take a lot of practice. Sean sent me one just before the Christmas holidays, and I used it to chase around a one-and-a-half-year-old kid in my family while on vacation. By the time we started shooting a few weeks later, I had it down pretty good!

Do you have a favorite scene in the film? Mya's character and Razmik in the taxicab, engaging in a sexual act as they go through the car wash, is probably the most iconic scene in the film. It's a single take, in real time, with Sean holding the camera in the backseat, and all natural light, of course. The way the water is splashing across the windshield, altering the lighting, is really striking.

What was the most challenging scene for you? The extended finale in Donut Time, when all of the branches of the story come together in this really tight space. We had 10 or 11 people in this small donut shop on Santa Monica Boulevard, and the challenge was how to keep the framing and lighting interesting, and keep all of the action coherent. Remember, Sean and I are both shooting really wide – 24 millimeters – so it was real tricky to stage and capture all of the craziness – people yelling, coming and going, *et cetera*. And we did! 🍄