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Peaks and troughs

Nicholas Chin speaks of how his first feature explores the dark side of Hong Kong's high society

Vivian Chen

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For Nicholas Chin, *The Peak* is much more than a spot to take first-time visitors to Hong Kong. Beyond the vistas, lush greenery and packed trams lies the inspiration for the director's first feature film, *Magazine Gap Road*, a thriller set among *The Peak* set.

"When I was writing my script, just going up there - the mist over the windy roads, the isolated gatehouses, the glimpses of well-dressed women in cars - felt so noirish," says Chin. "It's not like most places in Hong Kong, which are bustling and warm. *The Peak* is cold. You never know what's going on there. It's a weird mix of expats, blue-blooded Cantonese families and very discreet mainland people."

Chin's fascination with the mystery of *The Peak*'s inhabitants drives the plot in *Magazine Gap Road*. The film's protagonist is Samantha (Taiwanese model-turned-actor Jessey Meng), a museum curator in a relationship with Greg (Carl Ng Ka-lung, another model-turned-actor), a wealthy antique collector who also runs an upscale prostitution ring. Samantha, a former call-girl, has put her past behind her - until she receives a phone call from Kate (Qu Ying, another catwalk regular), an escort in trouble. By agreeing to help her old friend, Samantha finds her dubious past returns to haunt her.

Chin says his story is drawn from a real-life incident in which he overheard a friend who once worked as an escort talking on the phone.

"She got a call from a friend who was still in the trade one day," he says. "I listened to the conversation and I was struck by how utterly different my friend sounded at that moment from the woman I knew - [she sounded] much tougher, much colder."

In the film, Samantha risks life and limb for Kate, who is under the sway of Hans (Zheng Shiming), the same man Samantha escaped from years ago

by faking her own death. Remembering how she managed to dupe Hans back then, Samantha hatches a similar plan for Kate, with the help of ex-cop Mao (Elvis Tsui Kam-kong) and her supervisor, museum boss Lee (veteran actor Richard Ng Yiu-hon, Carl Ng's real-life father).

"I think I was attracted to those types of women," says Chin, who admits to having had a crush on the ex-escort friend whose experiences anchor the film's plot. "Samantha has a messy, dark past that she's far from beaten down by, but which has had an effect that explains her coldness and toughness. Everybody has some messy darkness in their past, and I shot the film in a way that allows audiences to reflect on those grey areas within the characters."

Chin's discovery of another side to his glamorous ex-escort friend is mirrored in the film, when Greg and Hans find themselves unsure of how far to trust Samantha. "Men see what they want to see, nothing more nothing less - especially with women," he says. "They both have ideas about her. That gives Samantha power, but not the kind she really wants."

Chin says his obsession with tough female characters (his previous film, the 14-minute *Tai Tai*, revolves around a rich socialite coming to terms with her husband's infidelity) stems from the matriarchal family he grew up in.

"I guess that's because I'm Shanghainese - Shanghainese families are run by women," he says. "My mother and sister are both strong women."

Magazine Gap Road's lead may be a hero, but even she is not immune to the destructive side of romance. Referring to director Max Ophuls as one of his major influences, Chin says he strove for the same sentiments that defined the German filmmaker's work, with the so-called beautiful people undone by love. "I wanted to play with the contrasts between the beauty on the surface of the world and the brutal things going on underneath," he says.

And Chin doesn't skimp on glitz, with glad rags and glam interiors aplenty, and quick edits kept to a minimum to develop his film noir.

"I love things when their colours and lines are so strong that they vibrate and melt in your eyes. I was very conscious of the visuals in my film, but I didn't want to do a film where you are being hammered with images," he says.

Chin used saturated shades of purple and blue to add coldness to the film with the help of Deborah Huen, a digital colourist who worked with Wong Kar-wai on *Happy Together* and *In the Mood For Love*.

The visual sumptuousness belies the fact that *Magazine Gap Road* is an

independent production made on a budget of just HK\$3 million. "Although it's an independent film, we still wanted to make it polished and convincing," Chin says.

For an indie film, Chin's production had perhaps more than its fair share of seasoned talent. His team included producer Lee Chiu-wah, who was production manager on Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and who has also worked with Wong Kar-wai and Peter Chan Ho-sun; cinematographer Chan Yuen-kai, who worked with Chris Doyle on *Ashes of Time*, and sound editor Jean Tsien, whose credits include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Lust, Caution*.

Nevertheless, it took Chin three years to complete. Two years were spent on the script and post-production took another year. And shooting wasn't always straightforward. During a day's shoot on a yacht, a typhoon struck; most of the crew got seasick and extra boats had to be called in for those who fell ill.

Casting was another challenge, although the praise he received for *Tai Tai* (selected for competition at Cannes in 2002) came in handy. "I wouldn't have made this film without *Tai Tai*," says Chin, who says he got to know Lee Chiu-wah only through his wife, who worked with him on the short. "[Competing at Cannes] did go to my head for four months before I really came back to earth."

It was a softer landing than the tumble that inspired him to make *Tai Tai* in the first place, however: his idea for the short came after his girlfriend left him for a rich businessman and eventually became a *tai tai*.

"With the script - and I can only say this a few years after [the break-up] - it was like me telling her not to do this."

Chin's started out making documentaries for the BBC. He then moved to New York to work for PBS, where a video artist's switch to making movies inspired him to follow suit. He attended digital video and short film workshops that helped him with *Tai Tai* after a spell making television commercials in Hong Kong.

Chin is already gearing up for a new project - one that will see him finally abandon his fascination with Hong Kong's aristocrats.

"It's about how far a young woman will go to save her marriage," he says.

"Coming out of a long post-production stretch on *Magazine Gap Road*, I'm getting back to writing and watching films, moaning about them, and watching more films."

It may be hard work, but Chin says he enjoys being a film director. "It's

the fact that you can have an idea about something and see it in your head, and you wait for years and see it on screen. The best part of the career of a director is you can still work when you're 80 years old."

***Magazine Gap Road* is screened as part of the Hong Kong Asian Independent Film Festival, Nov 15-31. For details, go to www.hkaiff.hk**

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