

Metaphysical Girl

Julia Kwan interviewed by Ileana Pietrobruno

Julia Kwan's first feature, *Eve and the Fire Horse*, has been described as "Luminous! One of the most beloved films at Sundance this year" (Roger Ebert), "Exceptional! A slice of delicately captured childhood" (Variety) and as "A flight of lyrical filmmaking that's by turns amusing and touching" (Macleans Magazine).

Ileana Pietrobruno: So, Julia, people are loving your film.

Julia Kwan: You know, I honestly didn't know who the audience was for *Eve & the Fire Horse*. While I was making it everyone described it as a kid's film but I was like, "No, it's not a kid's film. What kid wants to watch a film about death and religion?" The surprising thing is that the kids who have watched *Eve & the Fire Horse* totally get it. However, it is a film for adults. I had a middle-aged Italian woman come up to me and say, "Your film just described my childhood": it hasn't just been Chinese-Canadians that relate to the story. There's something universal about the film's themes because everyone knows what it's like to be a confused and questioning child, though, I don't know that every child has the same metaphysical questions that the main character, Eve, does.

IP: Yeah, not every child ponders the meaning of death. How did you come-up with a child like Eve?

JK: Well, the film is inspired by two memories from my childhood. I was five years old when my grandmother died. At the cemetery there was a pond filled with koi and my father told me that my grandmother was reincarnated into a goldfish. Looking back on it, I think what a beautiful thing to tell a child. The second memory is from when I was eight years old. I somehow ended up at Sunday school where I was told that my grandmother was in hell because she was a Buddhist who didn't believe in Jesus Christ. So *Eve and the Fire Horse* is about Eve trying to reconcile these two ideas as to where her grandmother actually went and trying to figure things out on her own.

IP: How did you 'end up' in Sunday school?

JK: As kids we'd be playing on the street and these 'recruiters' would approach us to take us



to Sunday school. My parents were like, "Whatever. Free babysitting." It was an exciting time for me as I was very drawn to the ideas of 'absolute goodness' and 'do good unto others'. I really wanted to be a saint. Isn't that horribly ridiculous! But it was so much a part of the environment that I was growing up in. I watched a lot of Cantonese films - melodramas, musicals, and martial arts films - and these films were always about a big sacrifice that an individual has to make for the good of the family.

IP: In your film, Eve confuses religion, spirituality, and superstition. Is there any difference?

JK: If you look at it through the eyes of a child - definitely not. As an adult, I'm still trying to figure that out. I find it really hard to separate spirituality and superstition because in Buddhist culture they're interwoven. My parent's spiritualism is more like black magic because it's all about luck. All the rituals are geared to bringing luck, prosperity and good health to the family. My parents don't meditate or work on 'self-improvement'.

IP: There's a tone of impending doom in *Eve & the Fire Horse*. Has something terrible happened to you in your life?

JK: I grew up surrounded by fatalism, in a very superstitious household that was always linking together events that aren't logically connected. For example, if you drop your pair of chopsticks before the Chinese New Year, you are cursed for the entire year, or if you leave grains of rice in your bowl, your future husband will be pock-marked. So I grew up with a lot of that fatalism and it really fueled my imagination. Like when I was five years old, I was talking to another little girl who was boasting that she had a big TV. I wanted to one up her by telling her that my grandmother was in the hospital but I couldn't remember how to say 'hospital' so I said, "Well, my grandmother's dead." And then two weeks later my grandmother died. For the longest time, I believed that I killed my grandmother with my words. As an adult, I still carry this fatalistic feeling. There always seems to be something terrible about to happen. It's because the connection between spirituality and superstition is still unresolved for me that I find it endlessly fascinating.

IP: You took a great risk in making a feature length film that is lyrical and poetic.

JK: When I was writing the script I got a lot of good feedback telling me to make the story more dramatic. I tailored the script to people's suggestions but I got lost. My producers were good in trying to support my vision, but at some point, I felt my voice was drowned out and I really had to figure out what the story was about. I think writing is the hardest thing. You're extracting something that's quite deep and sometimes painful. Anyhow, in the end, I chose to make a lyrical film that explores the interior world of a child. Who knows if I made the right decision but it felt right to me.

IP: How did you accomplish telling a film through the eyes of a child?

JK: First of all, I had to get back into the headspace of a nine year old. I found that listening to music from that era like Supertramp, America, and ELO was the best way to get back into the feeling of being a child. That joyfulness, that wide-eyed innocence, and that abject loneliness that children often feel, well, I did. I also watched seventies period pieces in order to fill my head with the essence of that time and I watched

films that are told through the eyes of a child like Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* and Truffaut's *Small Change* and *The 400 Blows*. When I saw Ozu's films I found it very interesting that the camera angles are at a low-angle, from the point of view of somebody sitting on the floor.

IP: What was it like working with two children?

JK: Well, there was quite a bit of whining about the wardrobe. I mean they had to wear all this second-hand polyester clothing in the sweltering summer heat, and Karena was rigged up to a church ceiling in an uncomfortable harness, and Eve was repeatedly submerged under water and the bubbles going up her nose hurt her. I felt really bad. As the director, I kept pushing for the shot but I didn't want to traumatize them. So I was careful to protect them. For instance with Eve, whenever she had to do a big crying scene, I would go off set afterwards with her and Sarah, the acting coach, to jump around and sing - just to release.

IP: But what was it like in terms of directing the children to act?

JK: Working with children is challenging in that it's unpredictable which is great because it keeps everything alive. You don't know what you're going to get at the end of the day because they're untrained. So you have to think on your feet and you have to explain things to them in terms they'll understand. In general, when I was directing *Eve & the Fire Horse*, I wanted an understated tone to everything. Less, less, less. Less emphasis on the words.

Less facial expressions. Just be. Working with kids, it's easier to get that because they have no bad habits. They give a more natural performance. Children also know how to turn inwards to where it's deep and vulnerable. In the scene where Eve sees her dead grandmother, Phoebe Kut who plays Eve is reacting to a piece of tape that's stuck on the camera. It's amazing that she could feel the emotions that she did by simply looking at a piece of tape. She must have been tapping into something that was deep and heartfelt. She's what you call an 'old soul'. I know everybody says that about their actors, but she has taught me so much. She's amazing.

IP: What was the hardest part of making *Eve & the Fire Horse*.

JK: One of the hardest parts was pitching the story. I met a man who saw the film after having read the script years earlier and he said, "It's strange because your film is nothing like the way you pitched it. The film is completely different from your script." I understand now why *Eve & the Fire Horse* was such a challenging pitch. There's a lightness, a spirit, a mood that simply cannot be articulated with words. You have to see the film in order to get it.

Ileana Pietrobruno has made two features - the darkly surreal Cat Swallows Parakeet and Speaks! and the raucous gender-bending Girl King. She is currently in development for the feature film Nana.

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