



PHOTO BY DAVID FEUILLATRE

Genre Girl

Karen Lam's *Evangeline* puts a female lens on a revenge fantasy tale

Story by
Katja De Bock

Whether or not you are a horror fan, Karen Lam's sophomore film, the revenge thriller *Evangeline*, is a jaw-dropping experience. So much so, that the Vancouver International Women in Film Festival (VIWIFF) opened their March 6th to 9th festival with the B.C premiere of the film.

"This decision marks a first for WIFTV — never in our festival's history have we opened with a thriller, but Lam's careful craft and stunning vision blew us away," says festival committee chair Amanda Burke. "In a genre traditionally dominated by male directors, we are particularly pleased to support Karen's work and recognize its significant contribution to the industry."

Evangeline is also heading to the Pifan/NAFF festival in Korea and will debut Super Channel in the fall.

According to Lam, who produced feature films, shorts and television series before taking the leap to directing, there is an unspoken hesitation in the entertainment industry to allot what are usually bigger budgeted productions to women.

"When I was a producer, I never saw the gender issues. It was not until I started writing and directing I slammed up against that brick wall and I didn't even know the wall was there," she says.

"I hear that women don't direct CGI [computer-generated imagery], they don't do action, they don't do genre and don't do these commercial ventures. And yet, what I am saying is that, yes, we do! In fact, this is all I do," says Lam, who put her private equity on the line to finance *Evangeline*, a low budget indie production.

The film was shot over 18 days in February of 2013, during the hiatus of pilot season, with a small team in different Vancouver locations, including University of British Columbia, Capilano University campus grounds, and Terminal City Studio. The budget included Canadian and BC tax credits and a license for an exclusive window by Super Channel.

The supernatural revenge fantasy deals with freshman Evangeline (Kat de Lieva), who goes missing after hanging out with an enigmatic, violent fraternity leader (Richard Harmon) and his pals. Beaten and left for dead in the woods, Evangeline finds herself trapped in a supernatural nightmare, and starts a violent quest to avenge her perpetrators.

In spite of a brutal storyline and mesmerizing visual effects, the film is not mere entertainment for the bloodthirsty. It asks the question whether it is better to turn the other cheek or risk losing one's soul to hatred, and what is true justice?

An avid newspaper reader, the concept came to Lam after she read about B.C.'s Highway of Tears and the Robert Pickton and Joran van der Sloot murder cases. She felt angry reading about all those women who fell between the cracks.

"I am a genre girl. Ultimately, it gets fulminated into a revenge story," says Lam, who watched Kung Fu movies and revenge films as a child.

Growing up in Manitoba, Lam was the oldest daughter in a Chinese-Canadian family with a professor dad and tiger mom, always forcing her to study with iron discipline. As a way of relaxation, the family gathered in front of the television with a pile of Asian action movies on VHS.

"Watching the films was probably a time for bonding with my dad. I was the oldest and he always treated me a bit like a boy," says Lam. "If I covered my eyes from a scary part, he'd stop, rewind and say, 'You missed the good bit.' I think I learned to appreciate a good decapitation!"

After studying English literature at Brandon University and law at UBC, Lam worked for years as a legal council at BC Film, followed by one year as a business advisor at Price Waterhouse Coopers, before branching off into successfully producing films and TV series such as *The Unprofessionals*, *The Bone Snatcher* and *Eighteen*.

"No matter what I did, I wanted to be passionate about it. I really loved film finance and producing," she says.

Fast-forward half a decade and Lam was up for yet another adventure.

"Honestly, I never thought I'd be a screenwriter or a director. I love film and television — and I love working in the industry," Lam says. "My dream was to be Sherry Lansing or Lynda Obst."

Lam wrote her first short script, *The Cabinet*, as an example of the kind of film she wanted to produce.

"If the script wasn't chosen for the NSI Drama Prize and if Norm Bolen, who was vice-president of Alliance at the time, hadn't told me I had the chops to pursue directing, I don't think I would have gone down this path. If I had known how hard it would be, I'm not sure I would have had the courage," she says.

Luckily, Lam had the steady support of her family and producer Karen Wong, who produced Lam's first short, *The Cabinet*, and most recently *Evangeline*.

"Karen [Wong] and I have worked together for 12 years — she started as my production accountant on my first television series, and she has become a producer in her own right," says Lam.

"I see us as Kirk and Spock," adds Lam of their relationship. "I can be a bit of a Kirk. I truly need someone who deals with the details. Karen Wong keeps me wonderfully balanced. She asks the tough questions, and comes up with contingency plans."

Another partner of many years is DOP Michael Balfry, who shot *Evangeline*. "Working with Michael Balfry feels effortless because we have such a similar aesthetic sensibility," Lam says. "I know him so well that I can just lean out from behind the monitor, give him a look, and he knows exactly what needs to get done. It's like telepathy, and I know it's so rare to have that sort of creative connection."



This close relationship proved crucial on the *Evangeline* set.

"80 per cent of the shoot took place out on location at night in rain and wind, so it was fantastic to have the director and DP work quickly, harmoniously and decisively," says Wong. "It really kept the momentum of the shooting day going and we were done our days in 12 hours or under."

Before the shoot of *Evangeline*, Lam and Balfry had long talks about how to visualize the story. Lam made a look book, an elaborated album assembled from photos taken from all over the Internet, conveying colour, tone and mood.

"I never shot list, my scripts tend to be very visual," says Lam. "I made the look book in order to give all the creative people and potential financiers an idea of how the film should feel."

It's not surprising that a film about a missing woman contains a rape scene, which is unpleasant to watch and to shoot. But Lam did not want to shy away from it.

"A rape scene is a tough thing to do as a woman director. If you hold back too much, people will say you don't have the guts to show that rape scene," explains Lam. "But if you exploit her again and you do exactly as a male has already done, what's the point?"

To solve this problem, she focused on the female perspective of the rape.

"It's the victim's perspective of these guys. People talk about the male gaze – often the perspective of the predator," Lam says. "You're scared for her, but you're not in her perspective, you're stalking her, which is a big premise for horror. But what if you reverse it?"

In order to show the victim's horror and confusion during the assault and rape scenes, Balfry used a Lensbaby, a system that allows the lens to be bent, squeezed, tilted or rotated while shooting. The resulting scenes have a slightly wide angle of view and a circular sweet spot of focus that falls off into blur around the edges.

Kat de Lieve's transition from a victim to a revenge angel takes place in a cellar-like purgatory room, where a spirit creature possesses her. These scenes are done with re-

KAT DE LIEVA (top and bottom) as *Evangeline*
with KAREN LAM directing (center)
PHOTOS BY DAVID FEUILLATRE

markable SFX, considering the low budget.

The practical effects on set were done by local FX house Brant FX.

"They are incredibly experienced and collaborative, and they have an incredible workshop of FX delights, so it meant that could work with our nonexistent budget and create magic from nothing," says Lam.

The CGI/VFX were done by Dreamcatcher in Sofia, Bulgaria.

"The company did all my effects on the short film *Doll Parts*, so we were used to working together already," says Lamb. "In some odd way, the Eastern European sensibility is closer to what my sensibilities are."

"Brant FX as the set SFX and Dreamcatcher as the post VFX team were definitely talented and creative," agrees Wong. "Dreamcatcher actually had a fire in their office, during which they lost all their computers and servers before delivering to us, so they actually had to re-create the effects! They worked very hard for the film."

Evangeline was edited by Jeanne Slater and finished at Side Street Post with colourist Gary Shaw, who co-

lour corrected all of Lam's films.

Though the mainstream media refers to her as a horror director, Lam says she sees herself as a fantasy thriller director.

"It's funny, because in genreland, *Evangeline* is actually not as brutal," she says. "In terms of a general audience, it's still quite graphic, but for

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- Karen Lam on working with Michael Balfry

a genre audience, it fits into thriller category."

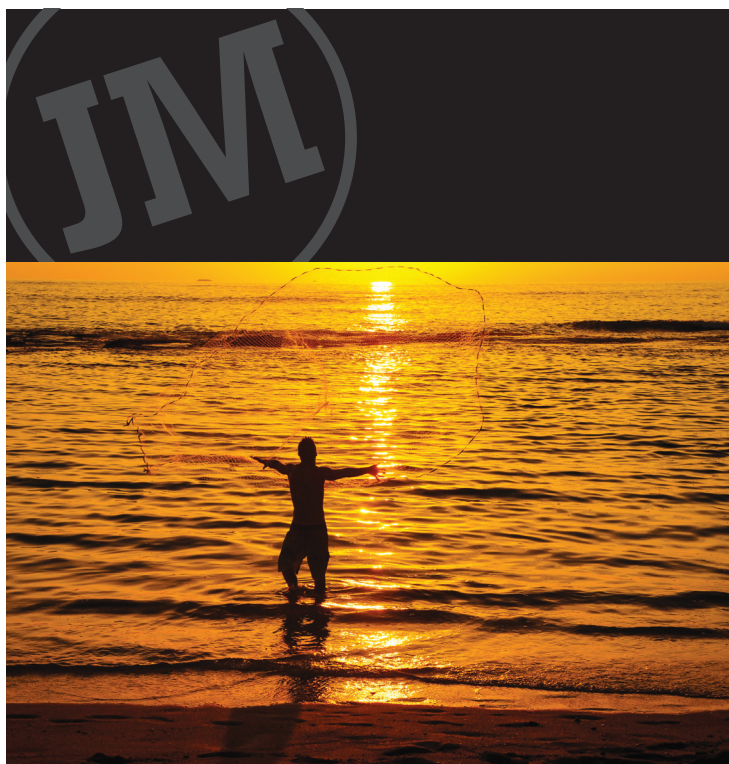

Lam gets her inspiration from masters such as Park Chan-wook, the Coen Brothers and David Lynch, and admires directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Roman Polanski and Stanley Kubrick because of their diverse oeuvres.

But genre is her passion.

"I make genre films because I watch genre films. I'm a genre fan, first and foremost," she explains. "I do watch more than genre, but if I have a choice between genre and a straight-up drama, I'll almost always pick the genre film. If there's a drag-on, I'm in." ■

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