



MICHAEL KANG

Interview by Nancy Moran

FROM STAGE LIGHTS TO studio lights, Michael Kang is one of the more well-versed Asian American directors in the film industry. His famous debut *The Motel* won the International Filmmakers Award at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, and immediately became one of the most coveted films in the Asian American community of all time.

Earlier this year, Michael premiered his latest film *West 32nd* at the Tribeca Film Festival in NYC, and it became an immediate hit with sold out shows and received rave reviews (including ALTRA's thumbs-up preview in the past issue).

Last month, *West 32nd* opened in Korea with a bang. So once again, Michael Kang and his team (including producer Teddy Zee, who produced hit films including *Hitch* and *Pursuit of Happyness*), are ready to embark on the international fame as proud and talented Asian American filmmakers.

One week right after the Tribeca Premiere of *West 32nd*, ALTRA's Editor Nancy Moran got the chance to sit down with Michael in NYC's Koreatown, and got all the inside scoop on *West 32nd*, *The Motel*, and the man himself.

ALTRA: Were you born and raised in New York?

Michael Kang: No, I was actually born and raised in Rhode Island. I grew up in Providence with parents of academic background; with one older brother and one younger half-brother.

ALTRA: What made you decide to go into film directing?

MK: Ever since I was a kid, I always played music, drew, and acted. So I went to La Mama theater (the oldest experimental theater in NYC) and watched a production, and that's when I knew...

ALTRA: So you went into theater production right after?

MK: I actually did theater lighting design and the technical aspects of it to pay bills first, but I learned a lot from it as well.

ALTRA: Such as?

MK: Well, you can tell if a play is going to be good by the lighting design – and we're not talking having fancy lights; just the thought process that goes behind it, because it is also a reflection of the thought process

behind the play.

ALTRA: I loved *The Motel*, so what was the message you wanted to convey through that film?

MK: "What people say is usually not what they really feel".

"WE HAVE TO RECOGNIZE ASIAN AMERICANS AS ONE COMMUNITY, RATHER THAN SUB-COMMUNITIES DIVIDED BY ETHNICITIES."

ALTRA: I agree wholeheartedly! So give us an update on what's going on with the actors now.

MK: Well, Jeffrey (Ernest) is studying to become a doctor, Sung Kang (Sam) acted and produced "Undoing", Jade (mom) is working on her documentary, Samantha (Christine) and Alexis (Katie) are studying acting.

ALTRA: Will there be a sequel for this film?

MK: No, the kids are all grown up now, sorry...

ALTRA: (Sigh...)

ALTRA: Now, let's talk about *West 32nd*—what inspired the story? By the way, congrats on the successful premiere!

MK: Thanks, it was good to see you guys there! A few years ago, reporter Edmund Lee from the Village Voice followed a Korean gangster for a year, then we met and decided to collaborate on turning the story into a film. The heart of story is about the relationship between the 2nd and the 1.5 generations, and this film portrays the connections between them, and emphasized the importance of their ways of co-existing and dealing with the clash.

ALTRA: And what's the message of this film?

MK: This film is about identity, co-existence, and the desire to belong. It also opens up the mainstream's eyes with the film's three-dimensional characters; who showed a wide range of emotions instead of just rage and violence. Such as John Cho's character, who unconsciously tries to figure out where he belongs in the society and where the "disconnect" came from.

ALTRA: How do you think this film will affect people's perception of NYC's Korea Town, or Koreans in general?

MK: I think it's going to show people that the Korea Town is much more complex than just restaurants and shops. They'll also see the comical aspect of the film, instead of seeing it as a straight-forward violent flick. Because it is about humanity, and the basic human desire to be accepted and wanted. Also, I was told the owners in Korea town got more businesses after the premiere of the film...what did you think of the film?

ALTRA: I liked it, and I wanted to go get Korean BBQ right after I saw the film.

(Both parties chuckle)

MK: I'm amazed that both of my films were made, because they were both risky with no big stars and the stories are ethnocentric...

ALTRA: You've obviously conquered some rough times during production, so what is your biggest frustration now with distribution?

MK: The biggest frustration is when people think they can see a film when it comes out on DVD or download

it online for free, instead of going to theaters and festivals to support it. The film industry—especially the Asian American sector—needs grass root support. And that means Asian Americans showing up in theaters and festivals, buying tickets and telling friends to buy tickets as well.

ALTRA: We can definitely relate, because a lot of people would rather read their friend's copy of ALTRA than to take out \$12 to subscribe, which doesn't help our circulation and therefore makes it harder for us to gain leverage in the mainstream media.

MK: Exactly. Asian Americans need to work harder to support Asian American media outlets and artists.

And we're not talking just verbal, but also monetary support. We have to recognize Asian Americans as one community, rather than sub-communities divided by ethnicities.

ALTRA: So what are your do's and don'ts for all the aspiring Asian American filmmakers out there?

MK: Do's: Perseverance, passion, and pursue both commercial and independent circuits. Try to take on as many projects and learn as much as possible. Most of all, be nice and collaborate with others. Don'ts: Don't do it because you want to become famous, and don't trash talk other Asian American talents—we have enough to compete with as it is.

