

# Korean American JOURNAL

**Badge Of Courage**  
Col. Young Oak Kim's WWII  
Valor Yet To Be Recognized  
With Highest U.S. Honor

**Street Smart Art**  
Nic Cha Kim Helps To  
Revitalize Downtown L.A.  
Through Gallery Row

**Retribution  
Distribution**  
Director Park Chan Wook  
And His Revenge Film  
"Old Boy" Land In America

# THE SUNDANCE SHUFFLE

Filmmaker Michael Kang And  
Actor Sung Kang At The Premier  
Independent Film Festival

PERIODICALS

\$3.95 US \$4.95 CAN

03>

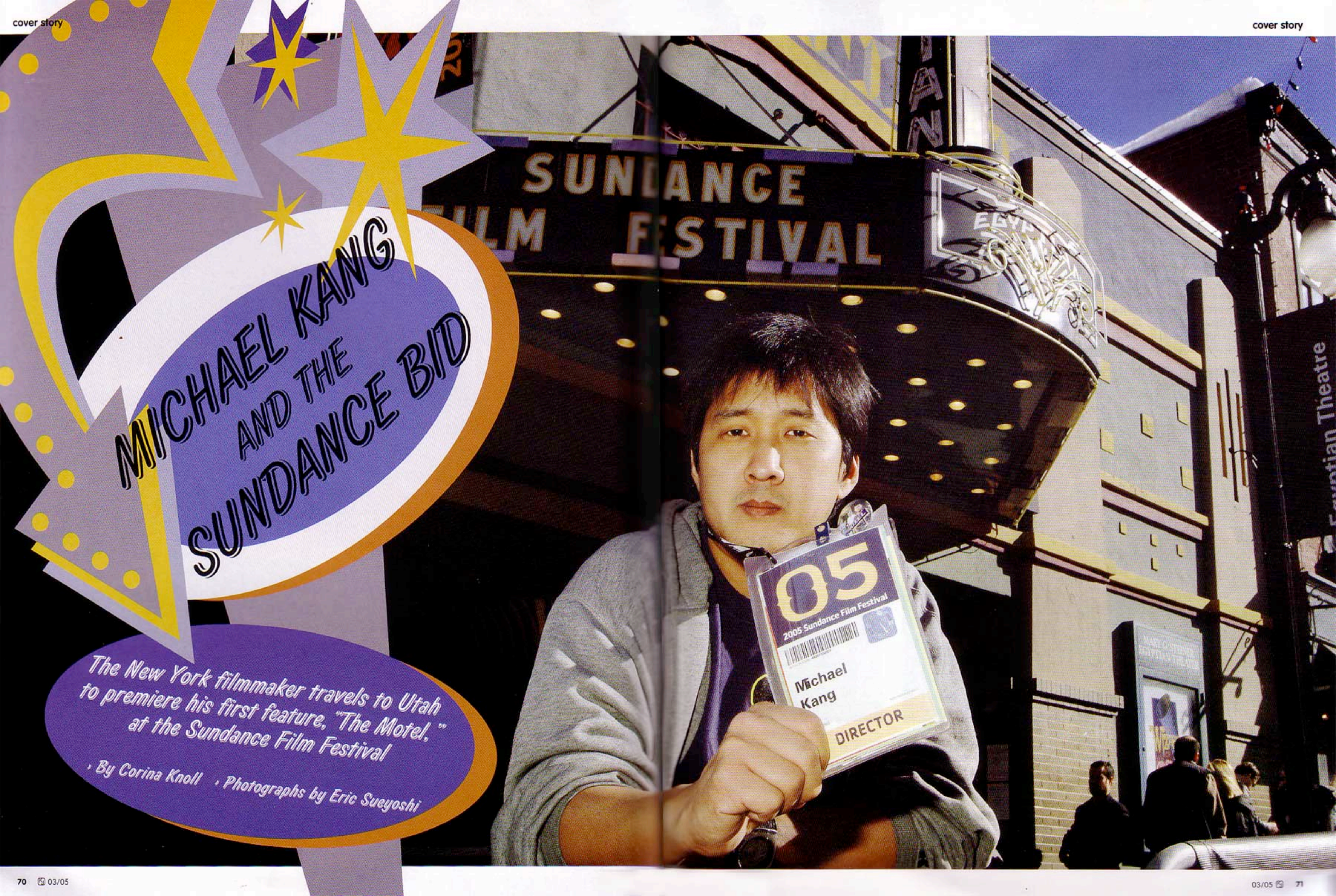


0 74470 96450 6



S4 P2\*\*\*\*\*5-DIGIT 10016

FRITA SHIEH  
A PARTNERSHIP  
12 E 33RD ST FL 4  
NEW YORK NY 10016-5017



**MICHAEL KANG  
AND THE  
SUNDANCE BID**

*The New York filmmaker travels to Utah to premiere his first feature, "The Motel," at the Sundance Film Festival*

*By Corina Knoll , Photographs by Eric Sueyoshi*

**PARK CITY, UTAH** — Michael Kang's never been *in* the Show.

Sure, he's seen the lights and heard the crowd, but he's never been on deck ready to swing away.

It's different to be a player. You make appearances at parties and partake in glorious buffets. You receive free ski lessons and other ridiculously cool schwag. You do interviews. You are respected. You are, at least for the moment, treated well.

A protégé of the Sundance screenwriter and filmmaker labs, he's been here as an observer twice before. And now, for his third Park City appearance, he wears a "Director" badge around his neck. With all the excitement and niceties of being a participant at the Sundance Film Festival, Michael is primed for this moment — except he could just as well throw up.

"When I'm just doing the normal stuff like taking a shower, I'm OK, or when I'm dis-

tracted by people, it's good. But when I'm alone, that's when I'm just kind of freaking out," the 34-year-old from New York says, with a nervous laugh.

It's 8:35 a.m. on Monday, Jan. 24. Later in the evening, Michael's film, "The Motel," will make its world premiere. Sitting at a small table at Park City TV and wearing the complimentary black down jacket given to all directors, Michael waits to be ushered into the studio where he'll appear on "In the Can," a local cable show that features filmmakers at the annual festival.

Mild-mannered and obliging, Michael looks like the jeans and T-shirt garden-variety Everyman. There is nothing polished about him, except perhaps his voice, which is kind and reflective. He's up for a conversation, but his eyes are tired and distracted (he arrived in town five days ago, but hasn't been able to find much rest). The project that began eight years ago as a kernel of an idea



will be unveiled tonight, and it's the anticipation that's killing him.

Waiting with him is Miguel Arteta, one of the film's producers, and one of the few people who have seen the film. Even the cast and crew and Michael's friends and family are still in the dark.

"A lot of them came out to support, and they just have blind faith that it's good. That's actually more nerve-racking to me than the audiences," Michael confides.

The night before, he had been feted at the annual Asian Filmmakers Reception. Attendees were urged to support his film, and Michael was introduced to enthusiastic applause, and even given a free snowboard from the event's sponsors. Cocooned in a safe environment of well-wishers, he was in good spirits, smiling with his family and mingling with industry insiders, while modestly acknowledging kudos from those who believe fiercely in him.

Now he's just hoping he can return the favor. "Before there was Sundance, before the labs, before any of this, the Asian American film community was really the ones who were backing me," he says. "It's great that they're so supportive. It just makes me terrified that if the film sucks, then [they] won't be."

Michael bemoans his decision to check out a few of his friends' movies here.

"I don't think it was a good idea for me to go see films before my screening," he says. "It makes me think too much. I keep going, 'I know why people like this film, and my film doesn't have that.'"

Miguel overhears this and admonishes, "You can drive yourself nuts — don't do that. People want all sorts of different things."

In his sixth year at Sundance, Miguel knows. He's an acclaimed filmmaker, having directed "The Good Girl" and "Chuck & Buck." He wants Michael to remember that being here is about being an artist.

"I just tried to teach him a great artist is somebody who just listens to their own vision and finds a way to create their own creative space, and doesn't worry about what anyone else thinks or what anyone else

is doing," says Miguel. "I know these audiences, and when an audience smells something authentic that really reaches out to them with intelligence, it always goes well."

Thankfully, before more insecure thoughts infiltrate Michael's head, he is whisked away for some onscreen time with the somewhat plastic host of "In The Can." (During a clip of "The Motel," this host takes one look at the chubby protagonist and marvels, "Wow, I love it — they're real people.") Afterward, Michael spends a few minutes with a reporter from the *Washington Post* who will be trailing him today.

Everyone heads over to the Yarrow Hotel where Michael must do another on-camera interview. It is now 10 a.m., and the Utah sun is cheerily inviting all filmgoers to come out and play.

But it's game day for Michael, and the countdown has begun. Life won't mean much until he sees the credits roll on his film tonight. And after that, it could be a whole new ballgame.

\*\*\*

For 10 days out of the year, 40,000 people descend upon the ski resort town of Park City. It is one of those rare times when the Salt Lake City airport welcomes people like Snoop Dogg and Carmen Electra, demonstrating that since actor/director Robert Redford created it over 20 years ago, the Sundance Film Festival has become a hip celebrity affair.

It wasn't too long ago when actors in indie films were thought to be slumming, but lately, even the most marketable names are turning to small films for street cred. What was once a marginalized art form has now become mainstream.

Stars like Jennifer Aniston seem to find integrity in doing something "low-concept" and have reaped prestigious awards for their indie work. Though paltry compared to Hollywood standards, some Sundance films can recruit decent-sized budgets thanks to the A-listers who support them.

"Once independent film had a place where the work could be seen, suddenly the merchants came. With them the celebrities came, then the paparazzi — and suddenly it began to take on a whole new tone," Redford said in a recent BBC article. "People started to say we had gone mainstream and Hollywood, but actually Hollywood came to us because suddenly there was good business in independent film."

Overall, though, the movie industry appears friendlier when it's wheeling and dealing on Mormon turf. Sundance still seems to have possession of its soul, where for every *Us Weekly* face, there is an unrecognizable up-and-comer. Here, amid the mountains and snow, there are no Town Cars or red-carpet premieres, just free buses with stops set up on almost every corner to take the mostly white, upper-middle-class patrons to the seven theaters spread out across the town. Cheerful volunteers who don't mind repeating answers to the same questions time and again man every inch of Sundance territory. Films screen multiple times, with tickets costing \$10 to the public. If the screening is sold out, there's still a chance that you might make it onto the waiting list.

But the biggest difference between Hollywood and Park City is that here the audience makes decisions. Executives from major studios stand by to gauge an audience's response to a movie on the chance that it might be something worth snatching up and distributing.

Sundance is the way of directors like Kevin Smith, the journey of films like "Napoleon Dynamite" and the beginning of actors like Vince Vaughn. It represents hope and possibility, and it's where passionate, penniless filmmakers are given a chance. It's how indie-turned-MTV-feature-film "Better Luck Tomorrow" was able to take on the entire nation. And why its director, Justin Lin, who once lived off oatmeal and slept on friends' couches, now has his own production company and is directing major-studio projects.

But if you are Michael Kang, your back story goes something like this: You graduated from New York University in 1993 and made a small name for yourself in acting and directing through various shorts and documentaries. Your break came in 2002 when your script was accepted into the screenwriters' division of the Sundance Feature Film Program, and then a few months later you made it into the filmmakers' division where you hobnobbed with Robert Redford and got an established director (Miguel Arteta) to believe in you. The following year you were the U.S. recipient of the prestigious Sundance NHK/International Filmmakers Award. Now you have one of the 120 feature films chosen (out of 2,613 entries) at the festival, and you're not sure how it will be received, but history has shown that people like your work.

And you like your work. You love it, in



OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Miguel Arteta and Michael Kang discuss "The Motel" on "In the Can," a local cable show featuring Sundance filmmakers. • RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: On the day of his film's premiere, Michael is interviewed on camera by Visual Communications. • WILLIAM BOOTH, a reporter with the *Washington Post*, takes a few minutes of Michael's time. • Michael chooses a clip from "The Motel" that will be used for his interview on "In the Can."

THIS PAGE, TOP: The night before his film's premiere, Michael attended the Asian Filmmakers Reception where he talked with Korean director Park Chul Soo. • ABOVE: Michael and one of his film's producers, Karen Chien, applaud the Asian filmmakers and actors present at the reception.



*"Before there was Sundance, before the labs, before any of this, the Asian American film community was really the ones who were backing me. It's great that they're so supportive. It just makes me terrified that if the film sucks, then they won't be."*

— Michael Kang on the day his film will premiere

fact. Love it so much that you've memorized the shape of its face and committed yourself to all of its tragic flaws. And while you sacrificed heaping portions of your personal life for it and depended on your wife for unwavering support, you managed to get a cast and crew to believe in it just as much.

Now to finally put your baby out there to see if she's got legs is exhilarating and horrifying. And then there is that possibility of a bigwig producer saying, "Kid, you got the stuff," and buying your film. At which point there are major benefits to be reaped by you and those who sacrificed with you because not only would it mean a lot to your career to get noticed, but it would mean a lot to the future of Asian Americans in film.

Essentially, if you are Michael Kang, you are under a bit of pressure.

\*\*\*

In a cramped room in the Library Center Theatre, Keith, tonight's projectionist, assures Michael that everything will be fine. It's 4:45 p.m., and "The Motel" will screen in less than an hour.

"You a little nervous?" Keith asks.

"This is the first time anyone's seen the film. I'm freaking out," says Michael.

Keith smiles and says understandingly, "I'll do my part."

"It's a pretty quiet film overall," Michael warns.

"Well, we'll listen for that," assures Keith. "Where was it mixed?"

"Sound One."

"Oh, Sound One? They're great. I'm sure they did a good job."

After a little more talk, Michael decides it's OK to leave everything in Keith's hands. He and Lisa Leone, the cinematographer on "The Motel," make their way down the stairs.

"Just think," says Lisa, "soon you'll be drunk."

"Soon I'll be passed out," he responds.

And then they step into the Utah air where the temperature has dropped 20 degrees and the last rays of sun hover over a small crowd of actors, producers and

Michael's friends and family.

Among them is Sung Kang, one of the leads in "The Motel." Having just arrived in Park City a few hours ago, he looks calm but is anxious on the inside.

"We've gotta sell this movie," he says with a half-smile.

This will be the first time he's seen the film. And he feels numb.

"I'm excited, but then there's nothing to grab onto, you know?" he says. "We have no control over it whatsoever. Now it's what we created, it totally speaks for itself, and then the audience decides what they feel about it."

Sung tasted the rewards of Sundance two years ago with "Better Luck Tomorrow." As one of that film's principal characters, he knows what it feels like to have executives come knocking, and it's hard not to want the same thing to happen here.

"You have a criteria now," he says. "You're working from maybe an elevated place that if this doesn't meet those expectations, then you go, 'Was that a fluke? Will I have this opportunity again?'"

This from a man who has posed for magazine covers, shaken hands with all the right people, appeared at DVD signings, spoken at conferences — done everything a movie star would do. And still as an Asian American actor, he doesn't see a lot of great offers and knows it's a big deal for him to have a three-dimensional role in a film.

At 5:25 p.m., Michael finds Sung to make sure he has a ticket to get in. Sung assures him that he does and then makes his way inside.



Minutes before "The Motel" will premiere, Michael lingers outside the theater in the cold Park City air.

Most of the crowd has dispersed by now, but Michael hangs back with a few others.

"Are you sitting with anyone?" someone asks.

"I don't think I'm sitting — I don't think I can sit," he says.

After a few more idle minutes, Michael finally walks toward the entrance.

\*\*\*

Ernest Chin (Jeffrey Chyau) is a pudgy, bespectacled 13-year-old who lives and works at a motel with his mother (Jade Wu), grandfather (Stephen Chen) and little sister (Alexis Chang). When not writing stories, he cleans up after guests who rent by the hour and visits his 15-year-old crush, Christine (Samantha Futerman). Undergoing puberty without a father figure, Ernest is intrigued when Sam Kim (Sung Kang) checks into the motel. While drowning his bitter past in alcohol and prostitutes, Sam mentors Ernest in the ways of women and life.

"She's not going to go for you, you're Chinese, man!" warns Sam about Christine, whose family owns a Chinese restaurant. "She's looking for some guy to come and save her from all that. All you do is remind her of it."

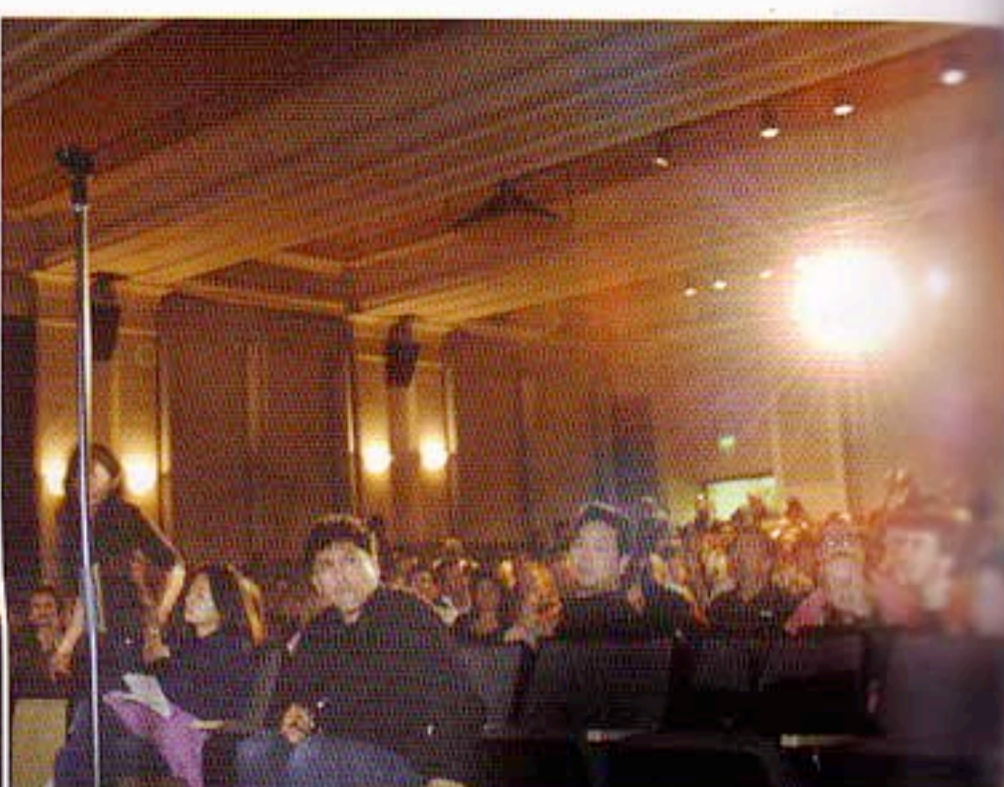
Boy and man find comfort in one another's company, but are forced to face a few of their demons while trying to understand how to function in the world. Initially based on the novel *Waylaid* by Ed Lin, it's a depiction of isolation that Michael says is similar



*"I honestly don't have any anxiety about the film. I love the film completely. If it gets picked up or not, that's a business decision, and it's almost separate to me than how I feel about the movie itself. I'm just proud to have been a part of making it."*

— Producer Karen Chien





During the Q-and-A-session held after "The Motel" premiere, Michael thanked the sold-out audience and encouraged his cast and crew to field questions.

to how he felt growing up in Rhode Island. And it's one that the sold-out audience gets, laughing out loud when appropriate and quietly soaking up the climactic or soft moments. By the end there's no denying it. His film is a solid, homegrown hit.

And Michael, who had restlessly stood while watching the entire film, is relieved. Walking onstage after the credits amid the loud applause, he insists on bringing the entire cast and crew onstage for the Q-and-A session. He makes jokes and encourages his actors to field questions. And then it's all over, and he is enveloped by admiring patrons.

His family members, a mix of siblings, cousins and nephews, stand aside and watch him, some of them teary-eyed. Michael's mother slowly makes her way into the crowd to find her son. When she does, she grabs his face with both hands, looks at him gently and tells him she is proud.

Theater employees urge everyone to clear out so that the next movie can screen on schedule, so Michael and his supporters make their way to a bar on Main Street. Here, at the clamorous after-party, Michael makes the rounds, allowing friends to buy him shots and pausing for photos.

"I am starting to finally believe that people actually like the film," he says as people walk by and pat him on the back. "I think it went well. That's what they tell me at least."

One of his producers, Gina Kwon, thinks it went more than well. "That first screening, you have no idea what — I mean you can anticipate, but you have no idea what the reaction is, but it was really the best I could have hoped for," she says.

And Michael's older brother, Peter, doesn't think it could get much better. "I could be accused of being biased, but I cannot be accused of misrepresenting the energy in the room or the reception afterward," he says as he hands out "business cards" that read, "My brother, Mike, is the director."

Actress Jade Wu, who played the mother in the movie, thinks the positive reaction from the predominantly white audience was one of the film's accomplishments.

"What was nice to see was their reaction to this story as a universal story," she notes.

The younger actors, Jeffrey, Samantha and Alexis, hang back with family members, while grinning and basking in the attention of something they don't entirely understand. The film industry is still very new to

them, and anyway, Jeffrey says he plans to become a doctor and would rather spend his time at Sundance going swimming rather than seeing movies.

Sung, however, is deep in thought. He looks somewhat troubled and can't seem to get comfortable. He will say later that it's because he is overly critical of himself on film and that he can't help but think about the need to get the film sold.

But Karen Chien, another "Motel" producer, is completely relaxed when it comes to the business aspect of the film.

"I honestly don't have any anxiety about the film. I love the film completely," she stresses. "If it gets picked up or not, that's a business decision, and it's almost separate to me than how I feel about the movie itself. I'm just proud to have been a part of making it."

Overall, there's a feel-good vibe to the room, and most want to credit everything to Michael, who Jade describes as the most gentle and patient man she's ever met in her entire life.

Toward the end of the night, the gentle leader is feeling the effects of complimentary drinks from friends and the release of having made it through the day.

"I think I'll probably pass out in some sort of snow bank somewhere," he says.

\*\*\*

"Every screening is different."

It is almost as if the words Sung spoke at an earlier lunch interview echo throughout the Prospector Square Theatre. There are 360 seats available, but tonight it's not even filled to half-capacity. At 11:30 p.m., the second screening of "The Motel" is a quiet affair. The audience sits politely in its seats amid no buzz whatsoever. It is perhaps due to the late hour on a Tuesday night and the

thinning group of original supporters, but this second public showing lacks the fresh excitement of the last.

This time, when Michael appears onstage, the Q-and-A session is tired.

"You want it to be like constant home runs, right?" remarks Sung as the last few attendees dribble out of the theater. People rub their weary faces and most head straight for the bus.

But one woman is beaming.

"It was wonderful. It was worth every minute," she says, almost floating out the double doors.

Hands clasped, she explains why she was

so moved by the film.

"I felt connected to the movie, and when you see something and you can't stop seeing it, well, it's amazing," she says, her eyes sparkling. "They did a great job. Everyone — the actors, the direction, the design. ... Like it was life, not a movie, and that's what made me feel good."

This is not the opinion of a big-time executive or hotshot producer, or anybody that will help Michael out in the movie business at all. This is a 46-year-old woman from Israel with a thick accent and a gap-toothed grin who attended Sundance on a whim during a visit to the United States.

But she is so incredibly inspired that it's hard not to notice her. Pulling Michael aside she crinkles her eyes and smiles.

"Someday we'll see you in Israel," she says.

Waiting for the last shuttle of the day, she huddles with her daughter in the frigid night. It's after 1 a.m., and she looks frail in her black wool cap and coat, but her face is glowing warmly as she continues to talk about the film.

The woman's enthusiasm is not enough to take away the sting of empty seats and moderate applause, but it's a nice moment. You imagine this is what Redford dreamed of when he first penned the Sundance mission. That there could be a venue where promising filmmakers with few resources could share their stories with people from all walks of life.

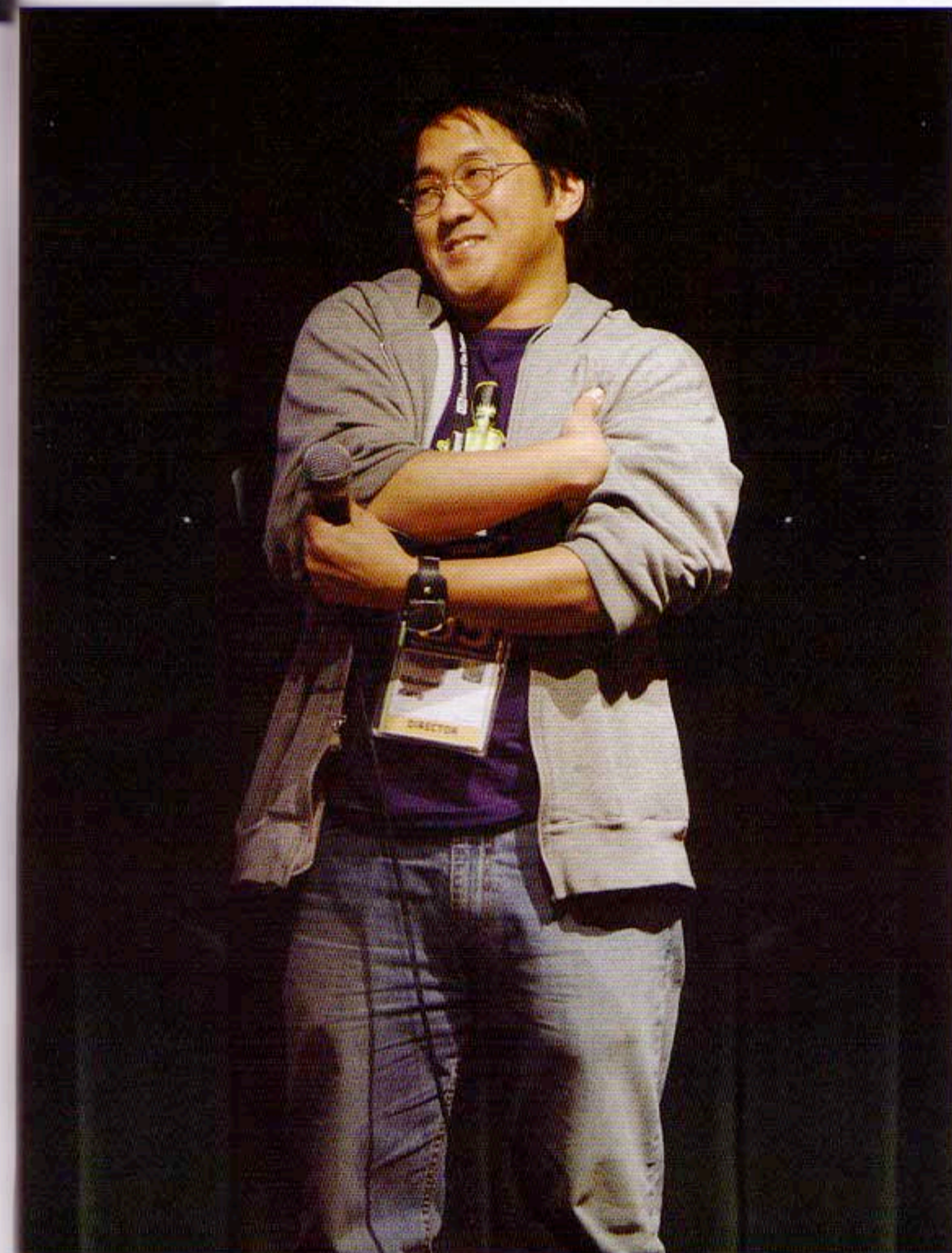
In the cold, dark air, Michael says his final goodbyes to those still standing around. He's off to bed before taking on the next day's screening. Climbing into a car with a couple producers and actors, he goes softly into the night.

\*\*\*

When Michael packs up his things and bids Park City adieu, he will not have been offered a big studio deal. He will have screened "The Motel" four times, and each time people will enjoy it. But this coming-of-age story isn't sexy enough for executives to see dollar signs. There will be more film festivals and conferences and chances to sell it in the future, but here there will be no grand slam.

But then Sundance is not always about bright lights, loud fanfare and having the crowd go wild. Sometimes it's just about touching the heart of a middle-aged woman who lives halfway across the world, who will forever remember your work.

Michael, welcome to the Show. ☺



### Checking In: The Cast of "The Motel"



Jeffrey Chyau  
"Ernest"



Jade Wu  
"Alma"



Samantha Futerman  
"Christine"



Alexis Chang  
"Katie"