

QUINZAINE
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2019

活着 唱著

JOHNNY MA



To LIVE To SING

A FILM BY JOHNNY MA

2019 - Drama - China/France/Canada - 1.78 - 100 min

SALES

FILMS BOUTIQUE

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CANADA

NOTABLE

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CAST

Zhao Xiaoli
Gan Guidan
Yan Xihu

ZHAO LI
DAN DAN
LAO WU

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
PRODUCED BY
CO-PRODUCER

Johnny Ma
Wu Xianjian, Jing Wang
Vincent Wang, Matt Drake,
Amanda Verhagen

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
ART DIRECTOR
COSTUME DESIGNER

Matthias Delvaux
Zhang Xueqiang
Adam Lim

EDITOR
DIRECTOR OF SOUND/SOUND DESIGN
SOUND RECORDIST

Ana Godoy
Guido Berenblum
Sheng Yong

MUSIC BY
ADDITIONAL MUSIC BY

Jongho You, Jimin Kim
Reggie Ba-Pe III

CASTING DIRECTOR
1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
PRODUCTION MANAGER

Wang Daomei
Polly Dong
Li Hua



SYNOPSIS

Zhao Li is the manager of a small Sichuan Opera troupe, living and performing together in a rundown theatre located in the outskirts of Chengdu, China. When she receives the notice of demolition for the theatre, Zhao Li hides the news from everyone else, fearing that this could spell the end of her opera troupe: besides the physical demolition of their space, it's the life of her "family" that is at stake. As she struggles to search for a new theatre for them to both sing and live in, the opera and its fantastic characters slowly begin to seep into her real world...



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first came across Zhao Li and her opera troupe back in 2013 when I watched a documentary made by a local journalist. The images were hastily captured on a handi-cam but I was completely captivated by its larger than life characters both on and off the stage. In the documentary, the troupe performed and lived together in a rundown theatre in the outskirt of Chengdu. And every day, rain or shine, they performed for an audience of mostly elders who came because it was a place to spend the afternoon. I was immediately reminded of one of my favorite Ozu films *STORY OF FLOATING WEEDS*. Just like the travelling troupe in the Ozu film, for Zhao Li and her Sichuan Opera troupe, performing was not only their job but it was their way of life. To me, these characters belonged to another time period, where they would be celebrated for their craft and skills. But in modern China where traditions are disappearing faster than ever, Zhao Li and her opera troupe struggle to survive.

I knew right away that if I was ever going to make a fictional film out of these people, the only way to do it would be with the real life opera members I saw in the doc. But was also aware of the challenges of having an existing documentary, it means if I wanted to make a fiction film, I had to offer something that was wholly original and different. This is when the idea started to simmer in my mind - a genre bending film that begins in reality but then becomes an actual Sichuan Opera in the end.



SICHUAN OPERA IN MODERN CHINA

The origin of Sichuan Opera has been placed as early as the 1700. Although not as widely known internationally as its cousin the Beijing Opera, Sichuan Opera took on the distinct form of small independent travelling troupes that travelled from village to village where superstitions of locals called for traditional opera to cast out ghosts or pay sacrifice deities.

In present day, the economic boom of modern China has posed challenges for the survival of this traditional art form. As young Chinese people now are less interested in watching or learning its craft. Sichuan Opera is enjoyed predominately by an aging local audience and visiting tourists. The surge in tourism has led to traditional Sichuan Opera being simplified for its more eye-catching “circus” acts such as breathing fire and changing face to be performed in hot-pot restaurants. Although this way is usually distasteful to the skilled performers, but because of the high pay, many troupes have disbanded as a result of losing members to the more lucrative work provided by tourism.



There are now only a handful of the traditional travelling opera troupes in Sichuan that still perform in the old way: Travelling from neighborhood to neighborhood and changing to new theatre locations every few years when local ticket sales dries up. A major challenge facing these small troupes like ZHAO LI's has been the decline in affordable theatre locations. Each time the troupes prepare to move again, there is the risk that if they cannot find a new theatre space to both sing and live in, the troupe family would be forced to disband.

I believe the story of Zhao Li and her troupe's fight for their home and theatre is the perfect metaphor to explore the larger theme of traditions struggling against the modern society's change of time.



CINEMATIC STYLE

Structuring the film as “the simple story of an opera troupe fighting for their way of life that becomes their own fairytale opera story” is the way I have been communicating with my key collaborators about this project.

For visual language, I would like to start with a specific mise-en-scene in which we can stay as wide as we can when it is to emphasize what the troupe’s real situation is in the current China. And letting the camera become more dynamic as we engage with the more magical and surrealistic parts of the film.

I want the Sichuan Opera performances to be treated completely differently, with a cinematic “PINA”-like lens, grandioso, and magical. ZHAO LI once told me that while performing on stage, she is completely in her own world away from her real-life concerns. And it is only after the performance finishes that she looks out into the audience and is pulled back to the grim reality of seeing how few audience members actually came to see the show. I tried to make the fullest possible use of all the tools of the cinematic lens, colors, music, and repetition of imagery to treat



opera performances as a complete separate world. In this cinematic breaking of the form, we could truly explore the inner worlds of opera troupe members' dreams, hopes and fears and explore the story in the most fantastical and spectacular fashion of dance, fight, color and sound of Sichuan Opera.

JOHNNY MA WRITER, DIRECTOR

Born as Ma Nan in Shanghai, China, Johnny first immigrated to Toronto at the age of ten. Johnny graduated from the film program at Columbia University and was a fellow at the Sundance Institute Screenwriting and Directing Lab in 2014. In 2012, Johnny moved back to China to make his thesis film *A GRAND CANAL*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.



In 2016, *OLD STONE*, Johnny's directorial debut world premiered at the Berlinale. It was awarded the Best Canadian First Feature Award at the Toronto International Film Festival and Best First Feature at the Canadian Screen Awards. The film was nominated in five other categories, including Best Film. Johnny currently resides in Shanghai.

FILMOGRAPHY

OLD STONE - 2016 - 80 min - China, Canada

OFFICIAL SELECTION | Berlinale | Toronto IFF | AFI Fest | Hong Kong IFF | Jeonju IFF | Melbourne IFF | Torino | Stockholm
Sarajevo Film Festival | CPH PIX | Festival des 3 Continents | Vladivostok IFF | Vancouver IFF
AWARDS | Best Canadian First Feature Film - Toronto IFF | Best Director and Best Screenplay - Stockholm IFF
Best First Feature Film - Canadian Screen Awards | FIPRESCI Award for Best Feature - Vladivostok IFF DISTRIBUTOR
NORTH AMERICA Zeitgeist Films | CANADA Films We Like | SALES AGENT Asian Shadows

A GRAND CANAL - 2014 - 20 min - China, United States

OFFICIAL SELECTION | Toronto IFF | Dallas IFF | Reel Asian Film Festival | Whilster Film Festival
AWARDS | Best Short Film Award - CAAMFest | Nominated for Best Short Film - Canadian Screen Awards
National Board of Review Student Award

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