



PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES AND COURTESY OF THE 3RD VISION FILMS

Director Zero Chou aims to show gay life in Taiwan as it really is

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Sitting by a window at a cafe in Ximending (西門町), Zero Chou (周美玲) appeared surprisingly patient and agreeable as she sat through a weekend afternoon of interviews prior to the theatrical release of her third feature film, *Drifting Flowers*, (漂浪青春) last Friday.

With a youthful appearance and an unpretentious way of speaking, Taiwan's foremost lesbian director looked more like a college student than a seasoned filmmaker with a clutch of award-winning films under her belt, the most recent being *Spider Lilies* (刺青), the winner of last year's Berlinale Teddy Award for Best Feature Film. Even more surprising was the disarming candor and earnestness that the 39-year-old director displayed throughout our interview, which made the conversation seem like one between old acquaintances catching up on lost time.

Chou spoke openly of her childhood memories of Keelung's red-light district, her early success as a documentary filmmaker, and her desire to tell the history of homosexuality in Taiwan using a language that can be understood by everyone.

Taipei Times: Your first job after graduating from National Chengchi University (國立政治大學) was working as a reporter at the then-tangwai (黨外, outside the KMT) television network known as Chuan Min (全民) and later at a local newspaper in Kinmen. What motivated you? Social and political awareness?

Zero Chou: That, and just me being young and curious, wanting to experience and experiment. Back then [in early 1990s] cable television stations were mushrooming. There were around 200 of them, 100 of which were the "underground" tangwai cable channels that formed the Chuan Min network. I got to spend lots of time with legislators back when the Legislative Yuan was quite a boisterous scene.

When I was working there, Kinmen was still under martial law [which was lifted in 1992], so it was a place young people thought was cool to visit and hang out at.

TT: Were you also aspiring to become a film director?

ZC: No. Even now I think I would be a lot happier being, say, an assistant art designer. There is an immediate sense of satisfaction from a job well done. The director says [he or she wants] a

white plate, you give [him or her] a white plate.

But, unfortunately, I realized how much I loved making films after I started making them. The original motive behind any creative act is always as innocent as a child. But once you try to execute it, you run into complexities and problems that make you wonder how the world has become as messed up as it is now.

TT: Like many local filmmakers, you started off making documentaries. Was this partially for economic reasons?

ZC: At first, yes. It's a lot easier to get funding for documentary making. I could live on grants of NT\$10,000 for three months and make plans for my projects. But I quickly grew fond of this form of filmmaking because it satisfied my appetite for making friends with all kinds of people from different backgrounds and social strata. I made documentaries about prostitutes, the visually-impaired, homosexuals, hand-puppet artists and nakasi (那卡西) performers [a type of music associated with red-light districts]. They all became material for my feature films. The characters I create [now] feel real and rooted in life because I had seen [so many different] lives.

[In 1999, Chou initiated the ambitious project *Floating Islands* (流離島影) with 11 other filmmakers. The series documented life on 12 islands separate

from the Taiwanese mainland. It is considered a milestone in the history of Taiwanese film because of its scale and its experimental approach to documentary making. Chou then went on to make the award-winning *Corner's* (私角落) and *Poles Extremity* (極端寶島), films about the homosexual community and lower classes, respectively.)

TT: Your trio of feature films [*Splendid Float* (豔光四射歌舞團), *Spider Lilies* and *Drifting Flowers*, the first three films in the ongoing Rainbow Colors project, which comprises six films about homosexuality] shows Taiwan's homosexual community in a traditional context. Is your interest in traditional Taiwanese culture also related to your childhood?

ZC: Yeah. I'm from Keelung, and my obsession with this seemingly tawdry and neon-lit lowbrow culture started when I was growing up in what was then the country's biggest port, some 30 years ago. We kids didn't speak a word of English, but we all knew the word "bar." The street [in the port's red-light district] was all lit up at night by neon signs that pictured naked women in wine glasses.

We had a red-light district called Railway Street (鐵道街). When night fell, the red light bulbs hanging in front [of the brothels] glowed in clusters. Women would come out to sit on stools, combing their hair and sprucing themselves up.

The family of one of my best friends in elementary school ran one of these establishments. We loved doing our homework in their living room cum bar. The beautiful "older sisters" and "aunties" would kiss us, pinch our cheeks and fix us things to eat and drink. These are warm, sweet-scented memories to me.

TT: Is this also the reason why you choose to tell stories in the form of melodramas?

ZC: Yeah. I come from a blue-collar background and have lived with members of the so-called underclass. Why should I speak in a language that they don't understand?

TT: You made your first feature short A Film About the Body (身體影片) in 1996, about cross-dressers. Eight years later you made your feature debut, *Splendid Float*, which is also about a group of drag queens. Were you

aware from the beginning that the themes of the body and sexual identity were recurring motifs in your art?

ZC: No, actually. I'm a slow person. [Laughing, Chou confesses that she didn't know she was gay until she was 29 years old]. I wasn't aware of my own sexuality or the reasons why I was attracted to what is usually deemed vulgar and gaudy. I made films and then, much later, I looked back and suddenly realized, "Oh, so that's where it came from."

TT: You once said that homosexuality to you is as much of an identity as it is an aesthetic. Would you care to elaborate on this point?

ZC: Taiwan's homosexuals have a special affinity for the colorful, bling-bling look and spirit. To me, this shares a common language with the flashy visuals Taiwanese culture uses to express and represent itself. I want to find a way for the two to coexist in harmony, at least in my films. If the two split, it would mean I am split, and I don't want that.

TT: So you have made it a point to show this aspect of Taiwan's homosexual community?

ZC: The best way is being truthful. Since *Drifting Flowers* I've been getting the same question from lots of people, who ask why I didn't portray gays as contemporary and urban. This is exactly the kind of thinking that upsets me, because being urban and modern is equivalent to being cut off from history. I don't need to fill in the blanks if someone else already has. But it seems that no one is interested in articulating the history of homosexuals in Taiwan except us [gay filmmakers].

TT: So you aimed to do Ts justice in *Drifting Flowers*? ["T" is a term used in the Taiwanese gay community for a tomboy, or butch lesbian.]

ZC: Yes! I simply wanted to tell a good story about Ts. Half of all Ts in Taiwan bind their breasts. But no films talk about this.

TT: You once said your films are always inspired by your friends' experiences. What parts of *Drifting Flowers* are based on your life or your friends' lives?

ZC: Well, my film crew said I am the old Lily [an Alzheimer's sufferer] because I always forget things and can easily disconnect myself from the outside world to live in a world of fantasies.

I made the second segment about the AIDS patient hoping that it would comfort a friend of mine who has AIDS and has attempted suicide several times.

TT: Is it true that you will take a break from your Rainbow Project after *Drifting Flowers*?

ZC: There's no rush to make all six films about homosexuality all at once. I'll work with completely different material and find new nourishment and inspiration for my next Rainbow Project. My next feature film will be a film-noir epic about the Aboriginal tradition of headhunting. These were sacred killings through which the warriors communicated with god. It was through the sacrifice of human heads that Aborigines created some of the most sublime, amazing sounds we have the privilege of hearing today.

TT: What are your thoughts on the Taiwanese film industry?

ZC: We always say that whoever controls the venue controls the market. In the film business, the venue is the movie theater. In Taiwan, theaters only show Hollywood films. The local film business was among the first to be given away during Taiwan's bid to enter the WTO. After that, there has been no stopping the Hollywood invasion.

When local films don't sell, people say, "Oh, it's because they're not entertaining and commercial enough." But in recent years we have seen some very entertaining films. It is just that they die prematurely before they can reach most audiences.

I think it's rather impossible to see [Taiwan's] film industry taking off again, as long as no changes are made to correct this structural problem.

Keeping it 'reel'

[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]

Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰)
Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰)
Warner



It has been quite a remarkable feat, for since Jam Hsiao's (蕭敬騰) self-titled debut album hit the G-Music charts at No. 1 nine weeks ago in June, it has only been kicked off pole position twice. The singer — who became a household name after he was invited to perform in part of a "penalty kick" showdown (PK賽) in Season One of CTV's *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) pop idol "reality" show — has eclipsed fellow Season One alumni Aska Yang (楊宗緯) and Yoga Lin (林宥嘉). Given his album's almost complete lack of character, this reviewer has been waiting for Hsiao's name to drop down into the bottom half of the Top 20 for more than a month. But as Hsiao's ranking shows little sign of slipping, it is time to ponder the reasons for his success.

The power ballad is clearly Hsiao's favored medium, and within its narrow limits, he is able to use his voice to good effect. Among the metal-tinged riffs, there are a number of more syrupy numbers, with clever shifts of tone and mood — palpitating drum machines in one, tinkling solo piano in another, a few bars of bluesy guitar here and there — but never really straying far from

the heavy orchestration of the Mando-pop mainstream. Lyrically, the album is unadventurous, sticking to love songs throughout, though there are occasional sparks of inventiveness, most of them contained in the hit song *The Emperor's New Clothes* (王子的新衣).

While individual songs never made much of an impression, repeated listening to the album revealed the secret of its success: it is the ultimate KTV playlist. You have the cloying sweetness of *Forgive Me* and *I Am Crying*, the rollicking choruses of *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *Blues*, all shaped with just the right level of technical difficulty to separate the sheep from the goats at the local Cashbox. To perform one of these songs well will certainly get kudos from your mates, but if you just want to belt something out about the despair of unrequited love at the end of an evening of hard singing, these songs will also serve pretty well. — IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Chun-Mei Taiwanese Opera
Troupe arranged by GTS
White Horse (我身騎白馬)
Singing International Media Company
White Horse, which is subtitled "Off the Hook Taiwanese Opera,"



is an arrangement of some classic segments of *gezai* opera with a mix of electronica, pop music and symphonic elements by Su Tung-ta (蘇達達), who publishes under the name GTS.

An arrangement of the title track was incorporated into a song that won singer Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩) a perfect 25 score in Season Three of *One Million Star*, and Hsu went on to win first prize for Season Three last week. A comparison of Hsu's "lyrical version" and GTS's complete version as it appears in the *White Horse* album highlights both strengths and weaknesses.

The track in *White Horse*, with its ardent operatic aria that soars over a full Western orchestral backing, has a cinematic feel, but unfortunately this cannot be maintained, despite the laying on of *erhu* and other traditional instruments, bells, sonar noise and much else. There are four seven-character lines to be sung, and GTS is not able to do enough musically with the arrangement to maintain interest over its six minute-plus length. In the end it comes across as somewhat bombastic. When GTS put aside the bells and whistles to assist Hsu in her *Million Star* composition, what remained was an elegant piece of cultural appropriation.

Throughout the album GTS seems to be adding too much of his own rather uninspired effects to a somewhat insubstantial amount of operatic core. His aspirations bring to mind people such as Bhangra artist Bally Sagoo, who worked Indian songs into his clubby electronica, but GTS hasn't the sophistication to blend the traditional and the modern in a consistent manner. His arrangements have moments of great interest, but not much staying power.

The album won the Best Recording Package at the 50th Annual Grammy Awards for graphic artist Xiao Qing-

yang (蕭青陽), and the gorgeous design and its lovely layout of the *gezai* lyrics and Taiwanese phonetics, rather than the music, is the best reason to purchase this album.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

The Dolittle's
The Domino Effect
www.thedolittle.com
In Taiwan's small but proactive expat



music scene, the Dolittle's have placed themselves squarely on the map with their engaging modern rock. Formed in 2006 by Changhua-based English teacher Andy Goode, the band has already released several EPs and enjoys a following on its local live-music circuit. *The Domino Effect* offers a picture of a band with a mature, solid sound.

This six-song EP covers a range of moods driven by catchy tempos and rock instrumentation and is polished with excellent sound and post-production quality. *Burning Hemingway* begins with dissonant but pleasing squeals from an electric guitar and keeps the listener's attention with pop harmonies held together by a ska beat. In this respect the band does a nice job of leading you into their world. They use a lot of groove-oriented rhythms, but the songs are focused: pop-rock structures give

a sense of drama, particularly on the catchy title track.

Secret Fire is a power-chord rocker with the restrained angst of a Seattle grunge band, and Goode's voice remains impressively steady throughout this song of admiration. *Let the Leaves Fall* — one of the EP's strongest tracks — is a slow and quiet number, with atmospheric guitar effects and convincing vocal harmonies full of yearning and regret. *All This Flesh* is nice for its textured guitar layers, spacey electronic sounds and tight harmonies, but it doesn't feel as emotionally dynamic as the edgy *Treading Water*. Here the band's instrumentation builds fear and apprehension, giving a vivid feel to the song's story.

The songwriting deserves praise for its sense of completeness; each tune sounds like it was crafted with great care. With this EP the Dolittle's show they can write and perform intelligent and catchy songs. One only hopes that they'll keep pushing the boundaries of their music.

— DAVID CHEN

Fire Ex (滅火器)
Where Am I? (我底叨位)
White Wabbit Records
Fire Ex (www.fireex.net) is a punk band



that managed to survive the emerge-crash-and-burn cycle of Taiwan's underground music scene. They formed in Kaohsiung in 2000 and used to hang out with the Feirenbang (廢人幫), a group of kids from Taichung into punk music, slam dancing and living off their parents. The band cites Green Day as an early influence and revelation of sorts: Hey! A band can play punk music that has catchy melodies and hooks.

The band has taken these elements and honed them into an original sound, which listeners can sample in this four-song EP. The post-rock influenced *3034* is a slow, short instrumental that burns with fuzzy and distorted guitars, drawing out a melody that builds to an emotional crest. The title track *Where Am I?* (我底叨位) has strong pop sensibility but rocks at punk velocity. With its feel-good chord changes, vocal harmonies and message of feeling lost, the tune could be a future anthem for Taiwanese youth. *Lightsome Road* (光明的路) also follows a similar formula, but the message takes a more hopeful tone ("Please give me all of your strength, we can face yesterday's mistakes"), and ends with a Beatles-esque harmony.

With these tunes, Fire Ex displays some of the scrappiness that characterizes the Taiwanese rock spirit. They sing mostly in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), which further adds a down-to-earth flavor to the music. The EP ends with the acoustic-tinged ballad *Good Night! Formosa!*, a sad but consoling ode to Taiwan, with its refrain "When the sun comes out again, there will still be good weather." The song is laced with tasteful synthesizer sounds played by American musician Andy Backer, who recorded and mixed all four tracks. The post-production leaves the EP with a professional-sounding sheen and enhances already-strong songs from this confident band. — DAVID CHEN