Michelle Yeoh

From ballet to bullets

She has been a ballerina, a beauty queen, an all-action film star and a Bond girl — and at 46, Michelle Yeoh still begs to do her own stunts

BY **RYAN GILBEY**
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There's a jaunty rap at the door, and in bounds Michelle Yeoh. She's on springs, despite just having arrived in London after stops in Paris, Taiwan and Hong Kong. But perhaps that's not surprising: from her earliest action films, energy has always characterized her work.

We meet in an apartment where glossy copies of *Variety* magazine are strewn around us, their covers trumpeting potential Oscar contenders such as *Frost/Nixon* and *The Reader*. Yeoh, 46, is no stranger to that world. After impressing as the Bond girl Wai Lin in *Tomorrow Never Dies* in 1997, she went on to star in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (臥虎藏龍), Ang Lee's (李安) Oscar-winning martial-arts love story of 2000. It was one of the biggest non-English language hits of all time. But the film she has come to discuss is more mesmerizing than most of the titles likely to be vying for Hollywood doorstops, the mesmerizing *Far North*, directed by the British filmmaker Asif Kapadia and shot on Svalbard, in the Arctic Ocean above Norway, the most northern settlement in the world.

Yeoh plays Saiva, who passes her days in the icy wasteland hunting animals with her companion, Anja (Michelle Krusiec), and reflecting on a life that has been cursed ever since a shaman declared she was bad juju. Wandering the plains one day, who should she find curled up on the ice but Sean Bean. Many women would consider this a boon. But once Bean has thawed out, his presence jeopardizes the women's relationship, with unsettling consequences.

"When I got the script," Yeoh says, "I thought: either my agent wants to kill me or he's telling me I need a challenge." She gives an emphatic laugh. Like all her films, *Far North* was hugely physically demanding.

Yeoh, who made her name as an action star in Hong Kong in the early to mid 1990s, is probably the actor of her age most likely to be found begging a director to stuff the insurers and let her perform her own stunts. While *Far North* might seem worlds away from movies such as *Police Story 3: Supercop* (警察故事3:超級警察) (memorable for one particularly awesome motorcycle leap on to a moving train), what they have in common is the sheer stamina each has required of her. Indeed it was the harsh conditions and natural hazards that attracted her to *Far North*, she says. But then it's probably a breeze to work under constant threat of polar bear attack when you've acted alongside Vin Diesel, as Yeoh did in *Babylon AD*.

"On *Far North*, we were always aware of being at the whim of Mother Nature," she says. "She's the biggest star in the film. But I had always longed to go to the North Pole, and the best time to go somewhere is when you're working on a film. You can roll up your sleeves, get to know the people. That's what I did — I spent time with the locals, I hung out with them, soaked them up, watched how they move and sit, with their legs slightly spread, their shoulders hunched. They don't have big gestures but their movements are basic, refined, pure."

She says that the role itself took her "to dark places most of us can't get our heads around. We were all living together on a boat, an ice breaker, with all this jaw-dropping scenery around us — all those miles and miles of nothing."

She says that last word as if she particularly savored it. You sense that *Far North*, like her role in Danny Boyle's 2007 science-fiction thriller *Sunshine*, came as something of a tonic after the big-budget productions she's done — from *Tomorrow Never Dies* to *Memoirs of a Geisha* ("Two-and-a-half hours in makeup — every day!") to the recent *Mummy* threequel, *Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*.

"It's so important for me to do my own stunts," Yeoh says. "The sense of achievement is so immense. But the studios don't want to take the risk. 'You're an actor, actors don't do stunts!' And if they do let you do anything, they wrap you in so much cotton wool it takes away the fun anyway."

Yeoh, who was born Yeoh Chu-Kheng (楊紫瓊) to an affluent Chinese-Malay family in Ipoh, Malaysia, has always been interested in using her body to express herself. "Body language is more fascinating to me than actual language," she says. "Before you get into the mind, you have to inhabit the physicality. Body language is a great way of speaking."

Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh made her name as an action star in Hong Kong. Her newest endeavor took her to the most northern settlement in the world, Svalbard, in the Arctic Ocean. PHOTOS: AGENCIES

[**TECHNOLOGY REVIEW**]

Developing games for major consoles such as the Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox and Nintendo Wii has traditionally been the domain of professionals. Independent, student or hobbyist game developers have always been more or less locked out from the exciting world of console development. To work on the big machines requires enough clout and funds to afford development kits and licenses and secure an agreement. But Microsoft has completely obliterated these barriers to entry with a solution called XNA Game Studio.

XNA Game Studio 3.0, released just over a month ago, is a completely free set of tools for creating computer games. Touted as "easy-to-use, approachable tools for hobbyists, academics and indie game developers," XNA is able to produce commercial-grade games for the Xbox 360, Windows PC and even the Microsoft Zune handheld device.

Once a game has been developed, it can be submitted to Xbox Live, an online gaming and entertainment service run by Microsoft, as a "Community Game," a new section of Xbox Live for games made using XNA Game Studio. This means that once a game is accepted and processed, it will be available to anyone who has an Xbox 360 linked to the Internet. Developers who submit games can select their own price (or make their game free) and receive 70 percent of the proceeds from sales.

Microsoft has now opened up the world of commercial game development, publishing and distribution. It has removed all costs from the process and given developers a top-notch set of tools and a decent cut of the profits. So what's the snag? Well, there really isn't one to speak of — developers will need an Xbox 360 machine to ultimately play test and submit their game, and they will need to pay the XNA Creators Club membership

Fancy designing your own game for the Xbox? PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICROSOFT

fee (US$100 per year), but after that the game will be available on Xbox Live in the Community Games section.

This is a quantum leap in terms of console development support and a very exciting one too — the only barrier to entry left is the skill set required. Developing games is never going to be easy per se, considering a commercial game requires programmers, artists, musicians and 3D modelers — each of these is a career in itself. However, for existing independent game studios (or hobbyists) who are developing for mobile phones, personal computers, etc, already, XNA could be the perfect solution. Since it supports the very Java-like and already popular C# programming language, as well as all of the de facto standards in 3D graphics, independent studios should be able to move over to using XNA relatively painlessly. The main incentives for doing this, of course, are access to the global market, high profit share and effortless distribution, all of which are handled by Microsoft.

For aspiring game designers there has never been a better time to start. The Xbox 360's hardware is incredibly powerful, incorporating a state-of-the-art graphics processing unit, or GPU, as well as a multi-core central processing unit, or CPU, which makes it more or less the same power as a PlayStation 3 or high-specification PC. The fact that XNA Game Studio can output an Xbox 360 version and a Windows PC version with no extra effort further simplifies the process — not to mention the ability to also output for the Zune handheld — as usually companies will take at least half a year to move their console games over to the PC or vice versa, and a lot longer to make a handheld version.

In conclusion, Microsoft's XNA Game Studio has virtually no drawbacks if you already have some knowledge in programming or game development. If not, the abstraction level has simplified things more than ever, meaning there has never been a better time to dip your toe in the water. Considering the price tag of zero and the wealth of tutorials on the Net, it's surely worth checking out.

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