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Interview with *David Ngo*

Director of *Jackie Bong Wright: The Queen from Virginia*

By Rohimah Moly



Photography by Joel Marasigan

TALKING WITH DIRECTOR DAVID NGO about his documentary *Jackie Bong Wright: The Queen from Virginia* was like catching up with an old friend. His candid personality put me at ease, and the interview became more like a conversation and took up more than the hour I had allotted for it.

Ngo's film won Best Documentary at this year's VC Film Fest, the Asian Pacific film festival in Los Angeles, despite the fact that it was the first thing Ngo had ever shot. The documentary follows Jackie Bong Wright—Ngo's aunt—at the week-long National Senior beauty pageant in Las Vegas. In doing so, it provides a rare glimpse into a pageant that most people have no idea even exists, and reveals a part of Jackie Bong Wright's life as the first Vietnamese contestant.

"The idea for the film happened by accident," said Ngo. He was having lunch with his cousin (Wright's daughter) one afternoon when she received a phone call from her brother about their mom being crowned Mrs. Virginia in the senior pageant. Wright's win qualified her to participate in the National Senior beauty pageant. Because Ngo does freelance writing (his articles have appeared in several Asian American magazines), his cousin suggested he write or possibly make a feature film about the pageant. He sat on the idea for two weeks before realizing that "it was an opportunity too good to pass up."

He recruited a producer, who also happens to be a friend, for the film and the two began to raise money and assemble a crew. Securing money for the film was challenging

for Ngo. "You're not asking people to give [money] to a nonprofit," he explained. Much of the financial support came from family and friends. "It was homegrown; my parents helped me fundraise by cooking for the events."

While raising money for the film was challenging, shooting the documentary posed other difficulties. To prepare for the film, Ngo watched a lot of documentaries to understand other filmmakers' style, focus and story. He also listened to a lot of jazz music because he wanted the film to have the same smooth and easy feeling one gets when listening to that genre of music. Although Ngo had a concept of how to shoot the film after this research, he told me that "you don't really know till you shoot it ... because in a documentary film, there are many factors you can't control." The film was shot at a casino in Las Vegas where the pageant was held, so Ngo and his crew had to contend with unwanted interferences such as the noise from the gaming machines as well as the ever-present gamblers and cigarette smoke. And unlike a scripted movie with real actors, there are no do-overs in a documentary. He chuckled and admitted that, "I couldn't say to the contestant 'that was good, can you say that again?'"

Thoughts on the industry

Ngo admits that there is not a balanced portrayal of Asians in most of Hollywood movies. However, he believes it has more to do with economics than discrimination. Hollywood is a business after all, and businesses stay in business because of profits. And so far, only movies with Asian actors that involve fancy martial arts—real or unreal—sell. However, Ngo believes that "you can tell a story unique to a certain culture that can sell."

While making money is the overarching goal in Hollywood, the lack of Asian artists in the industry is one of the reasons why there aren't many movies about Asian Americans. Perhaps it takes more of a critical mass to venture into the industry, as Ngo suggests. Combine that with the growing support from the Asian American community of movies about this group and this will likely bring about more films with a fair portrayal relative to mainstream entertainment.

Coming to a theater near you

With a regular 9:00 to 5:00 job, Ngo is currently working to get distribution for his documentary on his off time while squeezing in social activities. Whether it is on DVD or in the theatres, it would be an interesting film for anyone to watch. And for those with older immigrant parents like myself, this film could perhaps spark some interesting dinner conversation with Mom and Dad. **BN**