



Sundance film portrays dark side of direct marketing Autobiographical narrative touches a sensitive nerve

by Nan Chalat-Noaker, Record editor

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Most Americans probably didn't know the term "ponzi scheme" until this winter when Bernie Madoff was accused of bilking \$50 billion from a bunch of high-profile investors.

But Tze Chun knew exactly what the term meant and, from personal experience, he understood how pervasive and devastating these investment scams can be. His semi-autobiographical film, "Children of Invention," is part of the Sundance Film Festival Spectrum category this year and he admits that the timing, in terms of the recent economic news, couldn't have been better.

As a child, Chun and his little sister accompanied their single mom to a string of direct-marketing seminars. A native of Singapore, Chun's mom was desperately chasing the American Dream.

"I spent a lot of my childhood going to pyramid seminars, like the pitches you see in the film. I remember them vividly," said Chun in an interview just before the start of the festival. "Most of them did not work out and most of the people there were victims. I wanted to make a movie about that aspect of our culture."

According to Chun, his family was living in Boston during the pyramid-, or direct-marketing, heyday. "Everyone had something exciting they were trying to sell," he remembers. Unfortunately, Chun explains, many of the firms were set up illegally and would disappear with their members' fees as soon as local law enforcement caught on.

While their mom was busy trying to sell the latest new product, Chun says he and his sister were often home alone. Which is exactly the case when the young characters in the film, Raymond and Tina, begin their adventure.

In the film, their mom, Elaine, gambles the last of their savings, and a loan from a relative, on a dubious venture that requires a \$2,500 membership fee. Elaine, played with melancholy restraint by the accomplished actress Cindy Cheung, hopes to recoup her investment by signing up new members. But something goes awry.

Elaine disappears, leaving her two children home alone.

Ten-year-old Raymond, a veteran of numerous marketing seminars, comes up with a plan to sell one of his inventions to buy back their foreclosed-upon home.

Their adventure produces a mixture of suspense and compassion. According to Chung, some who have seen the film say it left them with a feeling of optimism. Others, he said, describe it as "emotionally brutal."

Chung declined to say how much he had invested in his own gamble, his first feature-length film. But he did say he was thrilled it was accepted by Sundance. Cheung and the two young actors who played Raymond and Tina, Michael Chen and Crystal Chiu, were also planning to come to Park City, he said.

During the festival "Children of Invention" will screen at the following times:

Sun., Jan 18, 2:30 p.m. -- Prospector Square Theatre, Park City Tue., Jan 20, 6:00 p.m. -- Temple Theatre, Park City Wed., Jan 21, 6:00 p.m. -- Screening Room, Sundance Resort Sat., Jan 24, 11:30 p.m. -- Library Center Theatre, Park City