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WINNER of 17 Film Festival Awards!**



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8-CITY THEATRICAL RUN: New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Vancouver, Bergenfield, Chicago, Gainesville, New Orleans

Runtime: 86 minutes | **Country:** USA | **Language:** English | **Contact:** info@childrenofinvention.com
www.childrenofinvention.com

CHILDREN OF INVENTION

A Film by Tze Chun

SYNOPSIS

LOGLINE: Two young children living outside Boston are left to fend for themselves when their mother gets embroiled in a pyramid scheme and disappears.

One of *Filmmaker Magazine's* 25 New Faces of Independent Film, writer-director Tze Chun makes "a fine feature debut" (Manohla Dargis, *New York Times*) with one of the most-awarded and best-reviewed films of the year. "Children of Invention" is by turns humorous and heartbreaking, an "urgent, artful...austerely poetic" (*Variety*) "edge-of-your-seat family drama" (Spout) that's both "powerfully moving and rigorously intelligent." (*Boston Phoenix*).

After being evicted, hardworking single mom Elaine Cheng (Cindy Cheung, "Lady in the Water") tries to maintain a normal life for her children, Raymond and Tina. Elaine juggles a number of jobs, including working for a questionable pyramid scheme. When Elaine doesn't return home one night, nobody knows the kids are home alone, and they are left to fend for themselves. As the days pass, Raymond, a budding inventor, realizes he needs to come up with a plan to take care of his little sister.

Referencing both the mortgage meltdown and suburban Ponzi schemes, "the film finds delicate moments of beauty and grace as its child heroes are forced to make their way" (*Filmmaker Magazine*). Featuring "gifted child actors -- off-the-charts cute, refreshingly free of Hollywood precociousness" (*LA Weekly*), "Children of Invention" is "as close to cinematic purity as one is likely to see this year" (*Film Society of Lincoln Center*), "a rueful homage to American dreams both wonderful and warped" (*Village Voice*).



CHILDREN OF INVENTION

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"A pyramid scheme is a non-sustainable business model that involves the exchange of money primarily for enrolling other people into the scheme, without any product or service being delivered. It has been known to come under many guises."

"Children of Invention" is about two young children who are left to fend for themselves when their mother is arrested for unwittingly taking part in an illegal pyramid scheme. It originally took place in the 1990s, the heyday of the pyramid scheme, but we updated it to the present day, because honestly, we didn't have a lot of money for prop cars. The world of the film is full of desperate Americans trying to achieve some shortcut to the American dream. That's the world I grew up in, and it's a world I think about a lot.

This was in the 1990s. There was a word out on the street, and that word was "money." Everywhere -- in diners, hotel lobbies, in homes and apartments, people listened to the latest opportunities breaking into the American market. Those opportunities went by many names: "multi-level-marketing," "business-direct-marketing," "network-marketing." The people went by many names as well: "Diamonds" and "Sapphires," "Executive Directors," "Network Entrepreneurs." In the heyday of the pyramid scheme, it felt like everyone was on the take. And nobody more than my family.

From the time I was eight till I turned fourteen, my sister and I followed my mother to countless seminars and conventions. We did Amway. When Amway fell apart, we did NuSkin. When NuSkin didn't work out, we did Market America. And so on and so on. Most of the time we got out before we lost money. Sometimes we didn't. Our basement was always filled with samples—skin cream, shampoos, miracle products. At one point we had dozens of satellite TV dishes stacked by the washer-dryer.

I sometimes wondered about the other people at those sales pitches, usually other immigrants and working class families. What were they hoping for? What did they think was going to happen for them? Perhaps the salesmen's repeated promises of stability and invocations of the American dream were simply too attractive to resist. The people who had the least to spare were the very ones targeted by these companies.

For us, those days are now over. But I'll always remember those smiling, hopeful people, and the relief and excitement that came over their faces as they signed over their money, like something better was just around the corner.

When I wrote the film, I was writing a personal story about the world I grew up in – a subculture of Americans trying to get-rich-quick in order to get themselves out of a financial hole. I didn't foresee the current financial crisis. But with the economy tanking now and foreclosures going through the roof, it seems like everyone's living through some version of what the Chengs go through in the film.

I hope this film can be a reminder that we've had bad times before, individually and as a country, but we've always made it out fine. America's a melting pot. It's made up of immigrants who are, by the nature of their journey here, survivors. It's what we're best at, and it's what we'll continue to do.

-- Tze Chun

Writer/Director, "Children of Invention"

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CREW BIOGRAPHIES

TZE CHUN | WRITER/DIRECTOR

Tze (pronounced "Z") Chun is a filmmaker working out of New York City and Los Angeles. He was born in Chicago and raised outside of Boston, and received his bachelor's degree in film studies at Columbia University. Tze's short film "Windowbreaker," made for \$600, was selected to play at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, as well as over thirty other high-profile international festivals. It won the audience award at the 2006 New York City Short Film Festival and best short film at the 2007 Vietnamese International Film Festival. That same year, Tze was selected to participate in Tribeca Film Festival's All Access Program with his feature "Artificial Dissemination" and IFP's No Borders International Co-Production Market with his feature "You're a Big Girl Now." In the summer of 2007, Tze was named one of Filmmaker Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film." Tze is currently working on multiple writing and directing projects. His feature script "You're a Big Girl Now" is based on the true life story of his mother, an orphan who was sold to Singaporean brothel and narrowly escaped a life of forced prostitution. Based on two years of research and interviews, Tze is reteaming with "Children of Invention" producer Mynette Louie to develop the film. The project was recently selected for the 2009 Sundance Creative Producing Fellowship. Tze also works as a painter and visual artist. He is represented at CVZContemporary gallery in Soho, and has commissioned portraits in private residences in New York City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, and New Orleans. Tze also painted the original artwork for the poster of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's Academy-Award nominated *Half Nelson* (THINKFilm) as well as the children's book drawings used in the film.

MYNETTE LOUIE | PRODUCER

An independent film producer based in New York, Mynette co-produced Andrew Bujalski's "Mutual Appreciation," which was named one of the top ten films of 2006 by *Entertainment Weekly*, *Film Comment*, the *Village Voice*, *Artforum*, *Greencine*, and The Onion's AV Club, among others. Mynette also produced several narrative short films by minority and women directors that have screened at film festivals worldwide. In 2008, she was selected by IFP as one of two emerging American independent producers to participate in Cinemart's Rotterdam Producers Lab. Currently, Mynette is in post-production on P. Benoit's "Untitled Haiti Project," a Sundance Screenwriters and Directors Lab project starring Edwidge Danticat. Additionally, Mynette is developing several narrative features, including Eric Lin's "Why We Pull the Trigger" and Tze Chun's "You're A Big Girl Now," with which she was selected for the 2009 Sundance Creative Producing Fellowship. She is also on the Selection Advisory Committee of the Sundance Institute's Feature Film Program and was recently selected to participate in the 2010 Berlinale Talent Campus. Previously, Mynette served as Economic Development Specialist at the Hawaii Film Office, where she authored the state's production tax credit, oversaw the \$7.3 million renovation of the state-owned film studio, and developed programs to foster local independent filmmaking. She also worked in business development and marketing at *SportsIllustrated.com*, Jupiter Research, and *Time Magazine*. A native New Yorker, Mynette graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard University with a B.A. in East Asian Studies, focusing on Chinese film and literature.

CHRIS TEAGUE | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Chris Teague is a writer, director, cinematographer, and graduate of the MFA program in film at Columbia University. His most recent directing endeavor was "Thorndike," a short film which played at the Tribeca Film Festival and IFP Market, among others, and was awarded the New Line Cinema Development Grant. Chris recently placed second in the Kodak Eastman Scholars Program, which recognizes film students with a strong focus on cinematography. As a cinematographer, Chris has shot several feature-length documentaries and short films such as Myna Joseph's "Man," John Magary's "The Second Line," and Felipe Barbosa's "Salt Kiss," all of which have played at Sundance, while individually they have screened at the New York Film Festival, New Directors/New Films, and Tribeca. Chris was also awarded best cinematography at the Columbia Film Festival for his work on "Man." Currently, Chris is in post-production on a short film he wrote and directed, "Monkeywrench," starring Sarah Steele ("Spanglish"). The short is part of a larger feature project about environmental activism that Chris is developing.

ANNA BODEN | EDITOR

Anna Boden produced, co-wrote, and edited the Independent Spirit Award winner "Half Nelson" (THINKFilm) as well as Sundance Special Jury Prize Winner "Gowanus, Brooklyn." With her partner Ryan Fleck, she also co-wrote, co-directed, and edited the feature film "Sugar" (HBO Films, Sony Pictures Classics), which premiered at Sundance 2008 and was released theatrically in April 2009.

T. GRIFFIN | COMPOSER

T. Griffin is a songwriter, composer, and producer working in Brooklyn, New York. Alone and with his band The Quavers, he has released four critically acclaimed CDs of songs in a homespun electronic style that's been described as "porch techno." Film scores include Michael Almereyda's "New Orleans, Mon Amour," Cynthia Lester's Slamdance Jury Prize Winner "My Mother's Garden," Kim Reed's Telluride sensation "Prodigal Sons," Esther B. Robinson's Berlin Teddy Award Winner "A Walk Into The Sea," as well as shorts for Peter Sillen, Jesse Epstein, and Jem Cohen. He wrote original songs and a full score for avant-garde theater director Anne Bogart's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and has created and performed live soundtrack shows for Jem Cohen, Brent Green, and for an international tour of the late Danny Williams' Warhol Factory films. As a producer and player, he has worked with musical luminaries including Vic Chesnutt, Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine and members of godspeed you! black emperor, Fugazi, and The Ex. Griffin was a 2008 fellow at the Sundance Institute Composer's Lab.

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CAST BIOGRAPHIES



CINDY CHEUNG | ELAINE

Cindy is from Los Angeles and has worked in New York in film, TV and theater for over a decade. She has been most widely seen in M. Night Shyamalan's "Lady In The Water," for which she was singled out by *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* for her performance as sassy Korean college student "Young-Soon Choi." She also played responsible daughter "Grace" in Greg Pak's "Robot Stories." Her many TV appearances include "Fringe," "Law and Order: SVU," "Sex and the City," and a major guest starring role on "Law and Order: Criminal Intent" opposite Malcolm McDowell. She is a proud founding member of Mr. Miyagi's Theatre Company, best known for the hilarious audition nightmare spectacle "Sides: The Fear Is Real..." and has performed at various theaters around the country including Lincoln Center, A.C.T. and South Coast Rep. Cindy received her MFA from the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and her BS in applied math. Yeah. She lives in NYC with her husband, novelist Ed Lin.

MICHAEL CHEN | RAYMOND

Michael is the son of acclaimed literary novelist and memoirist, Da Chen, and made his acting debut on "Sesame Street" at the age of seven. Since then, he has appeared on TV shows like HBO's "Flight of the Conchords" and "Saturday Night Live." He has also appeared in national commercials for Fuji, Bank of America, and the Cartoon Network. Michael's other passion is dance. He is a gifted dancer in hip hop, jazz, tap, and ballet. Michael makes his feature film debut in "Children of Invention." He was ten at the time of filming.

CRYSTAL CHIU | TINA

Crystal is a third grader who enjoys playing piano, speechmaking, and acting. She started playing piano at the age of four, and has won many competitions, including the Golden Key Music Festival, the Cecilian Music Club Young Artist Competition, and the New Jersey Music Teachers Association Young Musicians Competition. She has performed at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, at events for charities such as Children Helping Children and Malaria No More, and at nursing homes. Crystal is also active in Chinese School, having recently won several Chinese speech and word recognition contests. When not playing piano or making speeches, Crystal actively auditions for prints, commercials, and films. Crystal makes her acting debut in "Children of Invention." She turned eight during the production of the film.

CHILDREN OF INVENTION

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FUN FACTS



- We had a crazy fast development/pre/shoot/post schedule. Tze finished the first draft of the script in March of 2008, we got financing in April, shot in July & August (in 7 different cities/towns in 3 different states--NY, MA, NJ), edited in September and submitted to Sundance in October. It can happen!
- Our two child leads, Michael and Crystal, were two unknowns who had previously been cast as featured extras in "Transformers 2." They were supposed to play a brother and sister innocently eating ice cream as a Transformer suddenly crashes somewhere in China. But their scene was cut just before it was supposed to shoot. We think their parents were happy to have them cast in a movie where they don't get vaporized. We auditioned over 250 kids in open casting calls and schools in New York City and surrounding areas before we found them.
- Tze's mother, Ai Cheng, who played the mother in his 2007 Sundance short "Windowbreaker," acts in this film too. Tze's little sister plays one of the people getting pitched in the pyramid scheme montage.
- The film was written while Tze was a staff writer on Darren Star's short-lived primetime ABC Drama "Cashmere Mafia," starring Lucy Liu.

- "Children of Invention" is a film of many "firsts":
 - It's Tze's first feature as writer-director.
 - It's the feature film debut for actor Michael Chen, age 10, and the acting debut for Crystal Chiu, age 8.
 - It's Mynette Louie's first feature as lead producer. She previously co-produced "Mutual Appreciation."
 - It's Chris Teague's first feature as cinematographer. He previously shot three Sundance shorts ("Man," "The Second Line," and "Salt Kiss").
 - It's the first narrative feature financed by Impact Partners, whose members have funded Oscar-winning documentaries such as "Born Into Brothels" and "Freeheld," and Emmy winner "Ghosts of Abu Ghraib."
- T. Griffin, who was a Sundance '08 composer lab fellow, scored the film. He previously scored the "A Walk Into The Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory," which won the Teddy (Best Doc) at Berlin in 2007.
- Susan Shopmaker, who cast "Afterschool," "Great World of Sound," and "Shortbus," cast the film.
- Anna Boden, co-writer/co-director/producer/editor of "Half Nelson" and "Sugar," edited the film. We cut it in her living room. Anna also edited "Windowbreaker," Tze's short film on which "Children of Invention" is based. Tze and Anna did a trade in 2006 – she edited his short film, and he painted the poster for "Half Nelson."
- Tze continued to paint portraits to pay the bills through post-production.
- The film has screened at over 50 film festivals and won 17 festival awards, including 8 Grand Jury or Best Narrative Feature prizes.
- The film was released theatrically in 8 cities from February to June 2010: Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Bergenfield NJ, Vancouver, Chicago, Gainseville FL, and New Orleans. It was then released on Cable Video-on-Demand in June 2010 by Film Movement, and on DVD on August 10, 2010 by IndieBlitz.
- Tze and Mynette were named by Ted Hope on his "21 Brave Thinkers of Truly Free Film" list for their hybrid distribution strategies.

CHILDREN OF INVENTION

A Film by Tze Chun

CREDITS

Written & Directed by	Tze Chun
Produced by	Mynette Louie
Producer	Trevor Sagan
Executive Producer	Dan Cogan
Co-Producer	Dave Saltzman
Co-Executive Producers	Diana Barrett for the Fledgling Fund Kevin & Donna Gruneich Jim & Susan Swartz Barbara Dobkin Adriana Mnuchin Emily & David Pottruck Abigail Disney Susan Shopmaker Chris Teague Anna Boden Jennifer Behar T. Griffin Paul Bercovitch Susan Shopmaker Sheila Dvorak Michael Prall Sheila Dvorak Ashley Wellbrock Jason Smith Megan Szczecko John Shim Daniel Vecchione Sean Welski Corey Eisenstein Joe Anderson Trevor Sagan G.T. Womack Randall Good Dominique DeLeon Will Serber George Chiu David Giesbrecht D. Robert Wolcheck Sheila Dvorak Randi Glass Caleb Rugg Tze-Cheng Chun Kristin Ito Anthony D. Jones Kevin Chester Kuo Max Porter Jose Rodriguez Salvatore Valone Albert Wang Qi Xin Jasmine Yu Julia Zelman
Co-Executive Producer	
Director of Photography	
Edited by	
Costume Designer	
Original Music by	
Supervising Sound Editor	
Casting by	
Associate Producer	
Production Manager	
Assistant Director	
Art Director	
Assistant Art Director	
Design Consultant	
Gaffer	
Electric	
Grip	
Additional Electric	
First Assistant Camera	
Second Assistant Camera	
Additional First Assistant Camera	
Sound Mixer	
Additional Sound Mixer	
Still Photographer	
Additional Still Photography	
Acting Coach	
Casting Associate	
Key Production Assistant	
Production Assistants	

(continued)

Grip/Elec & Camera Equipment
Sound Equipment
Insurance
Payroll Company

Re-Recording Mixer
Foley Artist
Foley Editor
Sound Effects Editor
Music Consultant
Colorist
Audio Post-Production Performed at
Color Correction & Finishing by

Title Designed & Produced by
Title Designers

Title Producer

Title Coordinator

Original Score by
Trumpet
Violin
All Other Instruments, Recording
Songs

DVD Author/Designer

Theatrical Distribution Consultants

Theatrical Publicist
Marketing/Distribution Coordinators

Boston Street Team Coordinators

Street Team (NYC)

Street Team (L.A.)
Festival Intern

Handheld Films
Professional Sound Services
Reiff & Associates
PayReel

Paul Bercovitch
Shaun Brennan
Benjamin Zobel
John Moros
Mike Weiss
Scott Starbuck
Great City Productions
Deluxe

Imaginary Forces
Jeremy Cox
Lauren Hartstone
Joseph Salim
Cara McKenney
Karin Fong
Emily Nelson

T. Griffin
Dennis Cronin
Catherine McRae
T. Griffin
"Never Be"
Written and Performed by Kelley McRae
Courtesy of sonaBLAST! Records, LLC
Published by pubBLAST! Songs (BMI) / Kelley
McRae Songs (BMI)

"Sparrow"
Written and Performed by Kelley McRae
Courtesy of sonaBLAST! Records, LLC
Published by pubBLAST! Songs (BMI) /
Kelley McRae Songs (BMI)

"God Bless Us Anyway"
Performed by Collider
Music and Lyrics by Jed Davis
Courtesy of sonaBLAST! Records, LLC
Published by sonaBLAST! Songs (ASCAP) /
Eschatonality (ASCAP)

Zack Boger

Variance Films
Dave Boyle
Emma Griffiths PR
Anne Koester
Jason Jiang
Gary Mei
Dylon Loxha
Marvin Nardo, Chioke Nassor,
Lorena Ramirez-Lopez, Sydney Snyder
Dean Adachi, Ellie Wen, Salvatore Valone
Catherine Rehwinkel

CHILDREN OF INVENTION

A Film by Tze Chun

SELECTED REVIEWS

"A fine feature debut...while the politics are there, you might be too busy choking back tears to notice."--Manohla Dargis, *New York Times*

"I loved this movie. I can't remember when I have loved a movie quite as much as this one."
--Claudia Puig, *USA Today*

"Urgent, artful...austerely poetic."—*Variety*

"Wonderful...absorbing and deftly played."
--Gary Goldstein, *Los Angeles Times*

"A rueful homage to American dreams both wonderful and warped."--*Village Voice*

"An absolute gem....This is one that people really should see."--Jean Oppenheimer, *KPCC*

"Impressive...observant movie by a director-writer with a promising future."
--V.A. Musetto, *New York Post*

"As close to cinematic purity as one is likely to see this year."--*Film Society of Lincoln Center*

"A breathtaking achievement...resonates with the force and poetry of a fable."
--David Henry Hwang (*M.Butterfly, FOB*)

"Powerfully moving and rigorously intelligent."
--Peter Keogh, *Boston Phoenix*

"The gifted child actors...solidly anchor the film, but it's Chun's insights into the ways that poverty...erodes spirit that give *Children* its political and emotional heft."--*LA Weekly*

"One of those rare instances where all the elements fall in place magically to make a flawless independent film."--*Ningin*

"A nuanced, deeply engaging exploration."
--Jeff Yang, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"The real deal: a lively, nuanced, wonderfully-acted and emotionally-rich evocation of family life tested by economic misfortune. A simply terrific movie."--*Times Herald-Record*

"One of the Top 13 Films of 2009."
--*Hammer to Nail*

"One of the Best Undistributed Films of 2009."
--Jeff Deutchman (*Acquisitions, IFC Films*)
--Tom Hall (*Artistic Director, Sarasota & Newport Int'l Film Festivals*)
--Alison Willmore (*Editor, IFC.com*)

"Finds delicate moments of beauty and grace as its child heroes are forced to make their own way."—Scott Macaulay, *Filmmaker Magazine*

"Handsomely filmed...refreshing."
—Wesley Morris, *The Boston Globe*

"Non-formulaic, insightful, and at times heartbreaking, true 'indie' films like this are what make Sundance what it is."--*Film-Forward*

"An edge-of-your-seat family drama, pushed beyond the constraints of its micro-budget by two heartbreaking child actor performances."
—Karina Longworth, *Spout*

"Note perfect in its depiction of a family slowly edging toward disaster...balances precariously between horror story and children's fantasy."
—Peter Martin, *Twitch*

"Successfully walks a very fine line between pathos and bathos...a very good film."
—*Cinematical*

"Brings to mind the best of the Italian Neo-Realists' work....a worthy artistic accomplishment."—*Asianweek*

"Both kitchen sink real and lyrically beautiful, Chun's freshman effort is a remarkably graceful meditation on family, disappointment, and hope. Here is a skillfully told story with heart, and one that we haven't heard before."--*Notcoming.com*

"A mature and restrained effort, building to a quietly poignant climax...marks the emergence of a refreshing new voice in the cluttered indie landscape."—Michael Tully, *Hammer to Nail*

CHILDREN OF INVENTION

A Film by Tze Chun

PRESS SELECTIONS



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

by Nan Chalat-Noaker, Record editor
Posted: 01/16/2009 04:31:05 PM MST

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

The Boston Globe

Difficult times, past and present

Tze Chun looks at his new film and the indie industry



Tze Chun is at Sundance screening "Children of Invention," which features Boston-area

By Ty Burr
Globe Staff / January 22, 2009

PARK CITY, Utah - It has been a Sundance tradition for a quarter century now: Take unpleasant memories from one's formative years, mulch them into a feature film, and watch audiences applaud and Hollywood take notice. For Boston-area native and rising director Tze Chun, it's playing out as scripted.

Chun, 28, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based painter and filmmaker who was raised in Randolph, returned to Boston last summer to shoot "Children of Invention," a low-budget drama grounded in childhood experiences of watching his immigrant mother struggle to get ahead. Now he has returned to Sundance, where his short "Windowbreaker" - like the new feature, filmed in the Hub - broke through in 2007. In the intervening months, Filmmaker Magazine has named Chun one of "25 Young Filmmakers to Watch."

"Children of Invention" isn't one of the flashier Sundance entries. Instead, the film is a somber, deeply felt drama about two young children (played by 11-year-old Michael Chen and 8-year-old Crystal Chiu) who look on helplessly as their single mom, Elaine (Cindy Cheung), enrolls in one network-sales pyramid scheme after another, lured by the promised prospect of quick riches. It's a tale of a surreptitious childhood lived in cars, half-finished condos, and at "sales meeting" seminars; at one point, after Elaine is arrested, her son and daughter are forced onto the streets to survive.

"Children of Invention" is fiction, and Chun, interviewed at Sundance after the first screening of his film, is quick to point out that his own mother never abandoned him and his younger sister. But, he says, "the world of the film is one that I did grow up in. It was a world where we always felt one step behind and we were trying to make that leap to be in a place where we didn't feel like we owed money. We went to dozens and dozens and dozens of these seminars. I don't think I've ever seen that type of desperation on people's faces [elsewhere]. I hope I never see it again."

(continued)

Skin cream, shampoos, miracle products to sell - the basement was always filled with samples. The family usually got out of a venture before they lost money, but not always, by Chun's account.

Without being didactic about it, "Children of Invention" says this is an all-too common part of the immigrant experience - the fraudulent underbelly of the American Dream, baited for naive newcomers. Responding to a question after the screening, Chun said, "Ponzi schemes are endemic in minority populations. A lot of the seminars we'd go to, there'd be hundreds of desperate working class families and a lot of them were minority families - the people who had the most to lose."

The film was produced out of New York, with help from Chun's filmmaker friends - Newton-raised Anna Boden, codirector of "Half Nelson" (for which Chun painted the poster), served as editor on "Children" - but all the exterior scenes were filmed in Randolph and Boston. Chun's childhood home served as the house the family gets evicted from in the movie, and the Red Line, the Southeast Expressway gas tanks, and Downtown Crossing all make appearances.

"I always wanted to shoot in Boston," says the director, "because there are so many movies that take place in New York, and I felt that the suburban area outside of Boston is such a - to me, it's photogenic. Some people might not think that. In some ways, because I spent all my formative years there, I am a regional filmmaker."

Chun's childhood was divided into two worlds. At the age of 5 he tested into Milton Academy, received a financial aid package, and was a day student at the school through his senior year, after which he went to Columbia University. It was at Milton that he discovered film. "They had an editing bay in the A/V department, just a little tape-to-tape Super VHS. As soon as I started playing around with the camera, it was like this is what I want to do with the rest of my life. It got to the point where I would edit all night and building security would come in, and I'd have to call my mom at 3 in the morning and have her drive over from Randolph to pick me up."

"Children of Invention" comes to Sundance at a critical juncture in the film business. Distributors are shuttering, deals aren't getting done, and the whole indie landscape is feeling the squeeze. Chun feels the downturn has an upside in forcing filmmakers to seek online and other outlets. He admires director Wayne Wang's nerve in releasing "The Princess of Nebraska" exclusively to YouTube last year and even ventures to say, "I'm glad the independent film industry kind of broke this year, so that there can be some other distribution model that can work for the next 20 years. I don't think that there's anything that's off the table."

Perhaps, but he'd still like to sell "Children," which was received extremely well by Sundance audiences but hasn't received any offers as yet. For now, Chun's just happy to be in Park City along with his younger sister, Tze-ching Chun, and their mother, Ai Cheng. He's adapting the latter's early experiences into his next film: Cheng was sold to and raised in a Singapore brothel before escaping at a young age to Hong Kong and then America.

She now works as a personal trainer, in her son's words "teaching Chinese ladies how to be healthy and eat right and bench 250. She's a lot stronger than me." But anyone who sees "Children of Invention" knows that.

Ty Burr can be reached at tburr@globe.com.

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“Children” Director Tze Chun: “It’s strange to see your film get more timely day-by-day”

by indieWIRE (March 13, 2010)



After making the rounds on the festival circuit, Tze Chun's "Children of Invention" will open theatrically in New York and Los Angeles on March 12. The film follows the trials of an Asian-American family struggling to make ends meet. When their single-mother becomes entangled in a Pyramid Scheme and is subsequently arrested, her two young children are forced to fend for themselves. Chun discusses how his own family's experiences with get-rich-quick schemes informed the film and why he believes it is even more relevant today than when he first conceived it.

Tze Chun making introductions...

I'm an American filmmaker living in Brooklyn, New York. I was born in Chicago. My family is from Hong Kong/China/Singapore/Malaysia. I grew up outside Boston. I'm 29 years old.

I started making movies in high school. Before that, I wanted to be a painter. I still do a little painting—I did the poster for "Half Nelson" and I've done some drawings for Filmmaker Magazine. I got attracted to film because it was a young art (less than 100 years old at that time!) and I think that felt less intimidating to my 15-year old mind. Every afternoon, I'd get dropped off at Barnes & Noble, and I eventually read through their entire film section. I used my family's camcorder and roped my friends into acting in some kung fu or action movies. Most of my teenage years were spent trying to figure out how to make a toy gun look like it was firing a bullet (hint: put a firecracker in the barrel).

I wrote and directed two features and a bunch of short films in high school. And luckily they had a tape-to-tape editing station that I could use when no one else was using it. A couple times my high school security caught me editing in the middle of the night. Then I'd have to call my mom and have her pick me up from school at 3AM.

I didn't want to go to grad school. I don't know that I love the academic environment. After graduating from Columbia undergrad in film studies, I decided to make a schedule for myself. While I was painting portraits on commission and doing random videography work, I would also write and direct a short film every six months and write a feature screenplay every nine months. I made eleven no-budget shorts before "Windowbreaker" was accepted to Sundance in 2007. Soon after that I pushed forward on a couple screenplays, and "Children of Invention" got produced.

(continued)

On where the idea for “Children of Invention” came from and making the film...

I spent a lot of my youth going to pyramid scheme seminars with my mom and little sister outside Boston. I saw a lot of desperate people get swindled while trying to achieve some version of the American dream. We ourselves lost money a bunch of times. We did Amway. When Amway fell apart, we did NuSkin. When NuSkin didn't work out, we did Herbalife. And so on and so on. Our basement was always filled with samples—skin cream, shampoos, and miracle products. At one point we had dozens of satellite TV dishes stacked by the washer-dryer.

When I wrote the film, I was writing a personal story about the world I grew up in - a subculture of Americans trying to get-rich-quick in order to get themselves out of a financial hole. I didn't foresee the current financial crisis. But with the economy tanking now and foreclosures going through the roof, it seems like everyone's living through some version of what the Chengs go through in the film. It's definitely strange to see your film get more timely day-by-day.

I like to think I'm pretty collaborative. I try to listen to everyone's opinions while keeping in mind what I had imagined when I wrote the script. Also, as much energy as I've put into production, I've put just as much energy into trying to stay calm and collected through the entire process. I find that if the director stays cool, he/she is able to think more clearly, and the possibility of on-set drama is very low.

The writing/development/shoot/post-process went remarkably quickly and smoothly. I finished the first draft of the script in March of 2008; we got financing in April, shot in July and August, edited in September and submitted to Sundance in October. Our two kids, Michael Chen and Crystal Chui, were a couple of real finds. They brought an immediacy to every scene that I'd never imagined. People always warn you against working with kids, but I feel like the biggest problem I faced during production was making sure I didn't underestimate their abilities.

One nice thing about playing and attending as many festivals as we have is you get a pretty good sense of what people like about the film. People respond most to the kids' and Cindy's performances, as well as the family dynamic. Most people like the humor mixed in with the drama and vice-versa.

On his inspirations...

Children of Invention kind of falls into the category of movies about kids but for adults, so the movies I thought about most during the writing and production were films from that genre: Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander," Edward Yang's "A Brighter Summer Day," and Mira Nair's "Salaam Bombay!"

...and future projects...

My feature "You're A Big Girl Now" was actually supposed to shoot first, before "Children of Invention." It's a script based on my mother's childhood growing up in a brothel in Singapore. Over the last couple years I've traveled back and forth from Singapore doing research with my family. It was financed but then got put on hold, as these things do. My producer Mynette Louie just brought the film to the Sundance Producer Labs, and we're working on bringing an Asian production company on board, since it would shoot in Malaysia.

As far as finished projects, I've got a sci-fi short film "Silver Sling" that is premiering at SXSW 2010. It's part of the FUTURESTATES series funded by ITVS. Other directors include Ramin Bahrani, Greg Pak, and Tanuj Chopra.

On the writing side, I'm writing a supernatural drama that takes place in the Pacific Northeast, a no-budget sci-fi feature, and co-writing a thriller with two writers out in LA, all of which I'd direct. I also have a writing partner, Mike Weiss, that I work with on film and television (we were staff writers on ABC's Cashmere Mafia together in 2007). We just went out with a big-budget studio spec that I wouldn't direct, and so we're doing meetings, rewrites, and pitches based on that.

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Article located at: http://www.indiewire.com/article/children_director_tze_chun_its_strange_to_see_your_film_get_more_timely_day/