

Movie Maverick

Nancy Kwan broke barriers for Asian actors but her current story is purely personal

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What would you do if your only child married someone you disapproved of, then contracted HIV from his spouse and asked you to help him care for her?

For Nancy Kwan there was only one answer.

"He asked me to go (help her) and I went," said Kwan, 71, in a phone interview from her home in Southern California. "I did it for my son."

Kwan's relationship with her beloved son, who died in 1996, is one of three neatly interwoven stories that percolate through her new film, "To Whom It May Concern: Ka Shen's Journey." Part biography, part documentary, it screens tomorrow with Kwan in the audience.

The actress will receive the Hawaii International Film Festival's Maverick Award, given to a cinema artist "who defies the rules, forging a unique film career, transcending labels and thresholds to vacillate between Hollywood and global cinema."

Ka Shen in the documentary's title, is Kwan's Chinese name. The salutation is a key phrase from her first film, "The World of Suzie Wong" (1960).

"Suzie Wong" made Kwan an international star, the first Asian or Eurasian to star in a major movie. Hollywood had relegated such actors to secondary roles even in films about Asians. Caucasians in "yellow face" had the lead roles in "The Good Earth" (1937) and "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing" (1955), and portrayed Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto as well.

HIFF MAVERICK AWARD

Film star Nancy Kwan will be honored at the Hawaii International Film Festival screening of "To Whom It May Concern: Ka Shen's Journey":

- » **When:** 6:30 p.m. tomorrow
- » **Where:** Regal Dole Cannery Stadium 18
- » **Call:** 792-1577 or visit www.hiff.org

Kwan had studied ballet and wanted to be a dancer, but auditioned for the role. France Nuyen, who'd played Suzie Wong on Broadway, was the producers' first choice, but when the French-Vietnamese star dropped out, Kwan was chosen to replace her.

She took the job with no long-term expectations of future work. "I wanted to be a ballet dancer and just fell into acting," Kwan said.

"Everything in life is timing and I was just in the right place at the right time, the right age and everything else."

Kwan got to dance in her second film, the 1961 big-screen treatment of Rodgers & Hammerstein's Broadway hit, "Flower Drum Song." It was the first major film production in which almost every top role was played by an Asian or Eurasian actor. Kwan, as showgirl Linda Lo, worked with veterans James Shigeta, Jack Soo, Miyoshi Umeki, Benson Fong, James Hong, Reiko Sato and Victor Sen Young.

Better still, from her perspective, was the opportunity to star in big musical numbers. "I wanted to dance, and (now) I could dance."

Kwan's impact on Hollywood through those two films is a second theme of "To Whom It May Concern" -- a story that has been told before but cannot be told too often. Many people are still unaware of the "yellow face" era, and director/screenwriter Brian Jamieson thoroughly documents Kwan's importance as an inspiration for subsequent generations of Asian-American actors.

As for modern concerns about Asian actors taking roles that may perpetuate stereotypes -- "Suzie Wong," "Miss Saigon" and all those kung fu movies, for example -- Kwan has been dealing with stereotypes all her life.

Kwan's parents met when her father, Kwan Wing Hong, was studying in England. She doubts that her Scottish mother knew what she was getting into. Pre-war Hong Kong was as racially stratified as the American South. Many Western men had relationships with Chinese women, but mixed marriages resulted in social and professional ostracism.

"I don't think she had any idea, and I don't think she thought much about it either," Kwan said. "I think she just jumped into (the marriage) and went to Hong Kong."

Kwan added that her father's parents weren't happy about the union, as he was their only child, but they "got to like her."

Still, Marquita Scott Kwan filed for divorce from her architect husband and left Hong Kong when Nancy was only 2. The actress didn't hear from her mother for

years and was raised by her father. She put her career on hold to return to Hong Kong when his health declined in the early '70s.

The most touching scenes in the documentary come when Jamieson moves beyond the subject of Kwan as an iconic pioneer to tell the universal story of a mother's unconditional love for her son.

In several scenes, Kwan chokes back tears as she talks about son Bernard Pock, his love of life, his success as a stuntman and artist, and their final years together before he died of AIDS at age 33.

As difficult as it was to share her feelings before the camera, Kwan said it was something she had to do. "I'm very quiet about my private life ... but every one of us has lost someone we love and maybe (my story) helps in some way. ... When you're younger you just think of living your own life and you take everything for granted. When one gets older you learn to appreciate what you have and what's been given to you."



Nancy Kwan became a Hollywood icon with roles in "The World of Suzie Wong" and "Flower Drum Song," but her current film project is intensely personal. The Hawaii International Film Festival honors her tomorrow.