One Step Back, Two Steps Forward for Eric Byler

Americanese captures 2 awards at SXSW as filmmaker tours with 2 new films

Much has been made about a recent upwelling of *almos*t-breakthrough indie films by or about Asian Americans, receiving ever-increasing general notice and fair distribution to find their way onto our local Blockbuster shelves: Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomor*row, Alice Wu's *Saving Face*, Greg Pak's *Robot Stories*, Gene Cajayon's *The Debut*, Chi Moui Lo's *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, to name a few. Now, kicking off the annual flurry of spring Asian-American film events after its triumphant debut at a leading industry festival, the newest film by *Charlotte Sometimes* director Eric Byler may be poised to propel APA film several steps forward into the ever-multiculturalizing mainstream of U.S. film.

For its world premiere at Austin's famed South-by-Southwest (after Sundance, the major, indie multimedia schmooze-fest), Byler's *Americanese* hit the ground running last week. Going toe-to-toe with some heavy-hitters (from Robert Altman's star-studded *Prairie Home Companion* to the Wachowski Brothers' post-*Matrix* foray, *V for Vendetta*), it captured both the Audience Award for Narrative and a Special Jury Prize for Outstanding Ensemble Cast.

This dual-recognition at a non-ethnic festival speaks volumes about what may be in store for *Americanese*, as well as its strengths. The strong, moody narrative is adapted (somewhat loosely, with the author's aid and blessing) from Shawn Wong's novel, *American Knees*, which had enjoyed some literary cross-over success itself. The ensemble cast led by Chris Tashima (a filmmaker himself, creator of the Oscar-winning *Visas and Virtues*) is nothing short of stellar.

Tashima plays Raymond, a handsome, successful but brooding UC ethnic studies professor wrestling with a mid-life crisis and trapped at the center of a steamy, tormented love triangle. Joan Chen, as the haunted Betty, is a standout. Veteran actor Sab Shimono, as Raymond's father, is mesmerizing even in the quietest moments when he appears to be doing nothing at all. The rest of the cast is similarly rock-solid. Young Allison Sie is charming as the ingénue, Aurora, conflicted not only in her feelings about Raymond, but also her upbringing in her multiracial family. As Aurora's best friend and Raymond's fierce antagonist, Kelly Hu is downright testes-shrinking. And then there's Ben Shenkman. As "the white guy" in the tangled relationships of *Americanese*, he gets regrettably little screen-time. Although he showed the chops to become a major dramatic actor in HBO's celebrated miniseries *Angels in America*, he gracefully does the most with a small role here. (And, let's be frank: his marginalization may gratify some Asian Americans; after all, *we've* been relegated to bit-parts and set-pieces since forever.)

The ensemble's Jury Prize is notable not only given the competition (Altman's adaptation of Garrison Keillor's stories stars Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Woody Harrelson, and Lindsay Lohan); but, for decades now, one of Hollywood's main rationales why Asian Americans have been kept from leading roles has been a supposed dearth of acting talent, and a presumption that "general" audiences couldn't "identify" with them.

The film's popularity is also a vindication of Byler, whose first film, *Charlotte Sometimes*, was a rich and skilled but quiet arthouse film. Emerging with and often compared to *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Charlotte* won critical acclaim, but was unfairly attacked by many Asian Americans not for its faults or merits, but for the false premise that it wasn't "Asian enough" and something uglier: the mixed-race background of some *hapa* ("half-Asian") actors and characters, and indeed of Byler himself.

Americanese features an exploration of some similar thematic and tonal ground to that debut film, but *augmented*. Focusing again on a tormented love triangle including a hapa love interest (a woman this time), it makes that interrogation of hapa/APA schisms in our community explicit. If there is an intense bond between romantic lead Raymond and the young hapa woman he tries to "mold" and push into an

ethnic consciousness, their relationship is still fraught with dramatic conflicts, prejudices, and their own individual faults and passions.

Authentic Enough for You

At the same time, its pedigree – its "authenticity" (dubious criterion as that is) – is unassailable. Based on a contemporary classic of Asian-American fiction, *Americanese* may in fact be the most "authentic" and authoritative representation of "APIA consciousness" ever to be filmed in a feature. Raymond's role as an AAS professor, the professional situations, the settings, and the backdrop of a thoroughly multicultural Bay Area, reflects the reality of the "new California" and the flavor of America's "most Asian" city better than any film I can recall seeing.

Not to put too fine a point on it (because it's far from the film's most impressive achievement), but as a former ethnic studies professor myself, I can tell you: *Americanese* is extremely gratifying for Asian Americanists. (And it's not *only* seeing an AAS prof as the handsome, romantic lead who "gets, loses, and gets the girl".) Rather than slow the dramatic action with pedantic dialogue, the film's smallest references and details of *mis-en-scene* represent volumes about the history and diversity of "the Community". There's a pleasurable "Where's Waldo?" aspect, in picking up on little background references and objects, canonical and contemporary – *No-No Boy* and *Making Waves* here, posters and jewelry and *Secret Asian Man* comics there, etc.

One Step Back

One of the most refreshing things about *Americanese* is that it's about and features Asian-American *grown-ups*. It portrays and stars APAs who are in that middle distance – neither the ultra-hip(hop), young, annoyingly gorgeous, fashionista tweenies through 20-somethings targeted by MTV, nor the crusty old FOBs of more old-school, historical "Grandpa and the railroad (plantation, concentration camp, laundry)" stories.

Rather, the film takes a step back to reflect a bit on the roots of Asian America – the field of Asian American Studies and the experiences of baby boomers like Raymond and, well, Shawn Wong, who had himself significantly helped to pioneer the "Asian American Movement" in the early 70s. Like Raymond, Wong is of a generation of activist-scholars who, inspired by other ethnic movements, labored painfully to find and define an "Asian American political consciousness" before any such concept existed. Just for example, as co-editor of the milestone literary anthology *Aiiieeeee!* (with Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Jeffrey Paul Chan), Wong had championed a yellow pride, pan-ethnic coalition-building, and a hyphenated identity "neither Asian nor mainstream American" at a time when we were "Orientals" (and later, "honorary whites").

And like some of the film's younger characters, many Asian Americans today take for granted the political history, not to mention things like now-commonplace ethnic studies classes. This "generation gap," along with the "(h)apa gap," play out realistically in the world of the film, as they do in ours.

Two Films, Two Markets

All of this adds up to creating a narrative context in *Americanese* that is thoroughly "Asian American," but (refreshingly) without that being *the point*, and without excluding non-Asian audiences. *Americanese* is, as Byler insists, "first and foremost a romance," and one fraught with real tension and problems, just like ours – whoever we are and whomever we love. As such, it nudges APA film another step beyond simplistic ethnic representation and race identity explorations that our young filmmakers have long considered a burden on creativity and reaching wider, general audiences like those at SXSW.

It's an interesting side-note that although the SXSW success and the upcoming APA festivals will keep him hopping with *Americanese*, Byler is in fact touring simultaneously with *two* films. What was supposed to be his second feature, *TRE*, was nearly finished when the rights came through for *American Knees* and post-production for *TRE* was back-burnered. He has embarked on a whirlwind of back-to-back screenings of both. After appearing with Wong at *Americanese*'s Midwest premiere and the opening night gala for Chicago's Asian American Festival on March 31, for example, it will be *TRE*, not *Americanese*, that premieres at the Wisconsin Film Festival in Madison on April 2, introduced by Gene Siskel.

This "duality" may not sit well with some of the same folks for whom representing hapas made Byler suspect when he made *Charlotte Sometimes*. But maybe that's also part of what let him make such a rich film poised to be a cross-over vehicle for so many and diverse Asian-American actors and characters. Maybe, just maybe, *Americanese* will attain that most elusive of Asian Americans' artistic and social aspirations: to break through with a great story, deep drama, and populate a world of lead characters, round and real, who "just happen to be Asian-American".

Who happen to be, in short, "normal".