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All-Asian 'Dragon Boys' spotlights Vancouver underworld

by Emily Wilson *Mon Mar 26, 3:27 PM ET*

The cops and robbers genre beloved of Hong Kong cinema has been successfully transplanted to Canada in a groundbreaking new film about Asian crime gangs.

In a notable first for a North American production, director Jerry Ciccoritti's "Dragon Boys" uses an all-Asian cast, pitting police against drug dealers on the streets of Vancouver.

The film screened at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival this week after being aired for the first time on Canadian television earlier this year.

Film-maker Ciccoritti said he received a surprised reaction from Hollywood contacts whenever he mentioned the film and its Asian cast.

"In the United States, the representative faces are still going to be a white guy and a white girl," Ciccoritti said.

"You still need Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. What makes us different is that immigrants stay separate."

The movie has an impressive list of stars, including Byron Mann ("Red Corner," "Catwoman") who plays the police officer, Tzi Ma ("The Quiet American"), and Eric Tsang ("Infernal Affairs"), who plays a gangster.

Hong Kong-born actor Simon Wong, who plays a high school senior who gets caught up with a gang and is part of a burglary that goes horribly wrong, said he was surprised by the script.

"I'd never read a script with all these Asian people," said Wong. "And they're all three dimensional characters with lives. I'm so used to the token Asian character -- usually a scientist or a refugee."

Ciccoritti, whose parents came from Italy, said his film is more a study of the difficulties faced by the children of immigrants than crime.

"Immigrants don't understand they are actually cursing their children," he said. "They want to give them a better opportunity, but the kids don't fit in in the new world, and they lose the connection to the old world."

Production of "Dragon Boys" was not without controversy. Before the series first aired the Chinese-Canadian community expressed fears it could lead to a backlash against Asians.

Several Chinese-Canadian film and television personnel were also reported to have threatened resignations.

As a result, "Dragon Boys" producers hired community leaders to act as script consultants in an effort to ensure authenticity.

This move led to subtle changes in character development, including a decision to strengthen the parts of female roles, who had previously been weak and submissive.

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