

Beat: Entertainment

Shed Skin Papa the rollicking Hong Kong dramedy playing in TIFF Competition

From Japan to Hong Kong back again

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USPA NEWS - A spirit of Pan-Asian friendship was on display at the October 26 press conference for Shed Skin Papa, the rollicking Hong Kong dramedy playing in TIFF's Competition section. "The first time we met, it felt like we were brothers," remarked first-time director Roy Szeto of writer Norihiko Tsukuda.

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"Working on this film, I realized there are a lot of commonalities between Chinese and Japanese culture," added Szeto of Shed Skin Papa, which began life as Tsukuda's Japan-based play before being adapted into this film starring Hong Kong megastars Francis Ng and Louis Koo as an unlikely father-son duo.

Ng, who was also present at the press conference, plays the titular papa, a widower who suffers from Alzheimer's, spends whole days drinking and has a constant, unexplained craving for bananas until one day, as the title suggests, his skin begins to shed "and with it, his age. Soon he and his son, played by Louis Koo, look more like brothers than parent and child. Through a series of whimsical, special effects-enhanced flashbacks, the pair take a tour through each others' lives, gaining a mutual admiration they never had but not before battling gangsters, tangoing with ex-lovers, surviving fires and even crash-landing a fighter jet in a wild, genre-bending tour of Hong Kong history.

The undisputed star of the show is Francis Ng who, initially almost unrecognizable under layers of prosthetics, eventually plays seven versions of the same character as he undergoes his Benjamin Button-style reverse aging process. In a feat of both technical and acting prowess, these multiple Ngs even get together for a bowl of noodles in one of the film's climatic scenes.

Asked about the casting of Ng in the title role, Szeto praised the star, saying, "I couldn't think of anyone else in Hong Kong who could've played the father." "I think Roy just doesn't know enough people. If he expanded his social circle a bit he'd realize there are a ton of great actors," demurred Ng, to laughs. The other key role in the film is that of Lik-hang, the down-on-his-luck, debt-ridden film director played by Louis Koo.

Ng revealed he was instrumental in the casting of Koo as his son, stating, "I've worked with Louis before, so I thought that if we worked together [on this film] it would go really well, and I'm happy to say it did." Added Koo: "Francis and I aren't that far apart in age, so I was surprised when I heard I'd be playing his son."

Koo also revealed a key bit of information on how he and Ng prepared to play father and son: "Before we starting shooting, Francis said he wanted to come over and have a meal with my father to see what our relationship was like. When we were shooting, especially when he was playing the version of himself in his 80s, he started to really resemble my father, so with his lead I was really able to get into my role." Shed Skin Papa's supporting roles belong to actors Jacky Cai and Jesse Li, who play Koo's estranged wife and recently deceased mother, respectively. Cai, playing a major role in a film for the first time, expressed her gratitude for the part, saying, "From the time I was young, I watched these two guys' films and loved them, so I was so honored to work with them." She added, "I burst into tears every time I read the screenplay."

Li said of her small but crucial part, "I think the role of the mother in this family is very important in her ability to love and accept the two leads. I hope you all fall in love with this film." As questions circled back to the international nature of the production, director Szeto was asked how exactly he went about adapting a Japanese play for the Hong Kong market. Commented Szeto, "I don't understand Japanese myself, so I spoke a lot with Mr. Tsukuda, and the first draft of the screenplay was written by him as well," continuing, "I also saw both the Japanese and Cantonese versions of the play, and the way the Japanese version was staged was very different, so it was a valuable experience." The final thought of the evening went to writer Tsukuda, who summed up his feelings on the Japan-Hong Kong effort, "I just want to say thanks to Mr. Szeto. It's just unbelievable." Shed Skin Papa, which had its world premiere at TIFF Wednesday, will also screen Friday, October 28 at 21:20. Source TIFF

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