

SAAFF film: Magic, storytelling, and the magic of storytelling: *Marvelous and the Black Hole*

By Nan Ma
IE Contributor

“Magic is about making an audience feel something,” imparts the eccentric magician Margot (Rhea Perlman) in Kate Tsang’s film *Marvelous and the Black Hole* to Sammy (Miya Cech), Margot’s accidental apprentice. The success of a magic act, according to Margot, hinges on finding a story as its emotional core.

Sammy, the film’s 13-year-old protagonist, is no stranger to the magic of storytelling. The recording of her mother’s story, a whimsical twist on the Chinese myth of the moon lady, helps to quell Sammy’s anger and loneliness after her mother’s death, especially when her loving but overworked father Angus (Leonardo Nam) finds a new love interest (Paulina Lule) and her sister Patricia (Omachi Kannon) is lost in her own world of RPGs.



Marvelous and the Black Hole

Frustrated by Sammy’s angry outbursts and delinquent behaviors and wishing to instill in her a sense of responsibility, Angus enrolls Sammy in a business class at a community college and threatens to send her to a camp for difficult youths, which Sammy imagines as a military-styled bootcamp, if she does not comply. It is at the community college where Sammy first meets Margot, who, as we learn later, carries tremendous losses of her own.

After Sammy reluctantly interviews Margot at the request of Sammy’s teach-

er (Keith Powell) for a class project, an unlikely friendship gradually blossoms between these two spirited characters. Margot teaches Sammy to find her own voice through magic tricks, while Sammy challenges Margot to face her past. They inspire each other to face their own vulnerability and find healing and joy in their friendship.

Tsang’s film skillfully connects the threads of magic and storytelling. In the story that Sammy’s mother told her, a beautiful empress, envied by the gods, is exiled to the moon, where she meets a space rabbit. Hostile toward each other at first, the unlikely pair soon recognize that they are not so different once they start to share stories. When Sammy learns about Margot’s tragic losses, she begins to recognize their similarities and is empowered to breathe new life into her mother’s story, turning it into the anchor for her

magic act, like the way that Margot has been encouraging her to do.

While films about magicians have mostly focused on men (*The Prestige* and *The Illusionist* come to mind), it is refreshing to see a story that centers women magicians in which magic does not serve as a tool for power and competition but functions as a creative outlet for expressing emotions.

Supported by a stellar cast, Cech and Perlman deliver superb performances. Their on-screen affection for each other is palpable. The scenes where they perform magic and make mischief together are affecting and delightful. Their friendship and stories will resonate with audiences for years to come.

This is the opening night film and plays at the drive-in. See page 17 for viewing details. ■

SAAFF film: Documentary *The Six* works to uncover the mystery of six Chinese men who survived the sinking of the Titanic

By Misa Shikuma
IE Contributor

It’s hard to remember a time before the 1997 juggernaut that broke box office records *The Titanic* launched the careers of its two leads, and forever cemented the tragedy of the British passenger liner within public consciousness. Writer and director James Cameron’s fictional story about an ill-fated love affair captured the hearts of millions, yet perhaps the most historically accurate detail of the film is relegated to a deleted scene, in which a lifeboat trawls the wreckage to rescue a Chinese man clinging to a piece of debris. But who was he?

From executive producer Cameron and director Arthur Jones, the documentary *The Six* chronicles one research team’s efforts to unravel the decades-long mystery surrounding the group of Chinese men who survived the sinking of the Titanic. Led by historian Steven Schwankert, the team’s journey of discovery reveals complex ties in a slowly globalizing economy and the far-reaching consequences of the era’s racist immigration policy.

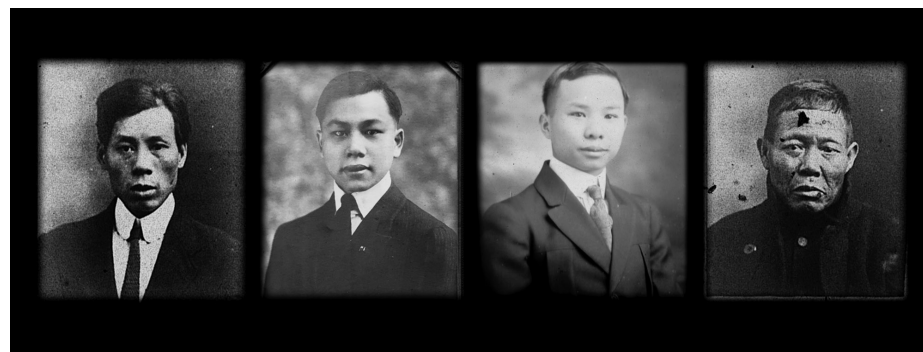
Primary sources have long confirmed that eight Chinese men boarded the Titanic as third-class passengers: Ah Lam, Fang Lang, Chung Foo, Chang Chip, Ling Hee, Lee Bing, Lee Ling and Len Lam. All but the last two survived. Initial probing reveals that the group were all seaman, sent by their UK employer to work routes across the Atlantic due to coal strikes in England. Schwankert’s mission was to find out more. How did six of them make it off the ship alive, when all other minority and lower-class passengers perished? What happened to them after the rescue ship, *Carpanthia*, docked in New York?

At first the research team feels thwarted at every turn. Anti-Chinese sentiment on

both sides of the ocean means little to no press coverage of their unlikely survival; the few mentions of them are pejorative and unspecific (e.g. referring to them as ‘creatures’ rather than by name). Anglicization of the passengers’ names makes tracking down possible descendants of their survivors a herculean task, as multiple characters in written Chinese can yield identical pronunciation to English-speaking ears. Chung Foo, for example, becomes a dead end as there are simply too many possible candidates to pursue. For years the cursive printing on the original ‘alien passenger list’ was interpreted as ‘Ali’ Lam, but the team has a breakthrough when they realize it’s actually ‘Ah.’ (This is only marginally helpful, however, since Ah is a term of familiarity rather than a proper name).

Finding authentic sources proves difficult, as many people want to claim proximity to the incident. When screening potential sources, the team learns to allow interviewees to speak freely on their own, asking few questions, so as to see if details match up with information that has already been independently confirmed. The more they interview, though, the more they realize how rare it is for immigrants of that generation to speak about their pasts – even an event as significant as the Titanic. Fang Lang, whose experience inspired the deleted scene, eventually settled in the United States, yet he never told his wife or son his incredible story.

Through perseverance, Schwankert’s team, which comprised as many as 16 people working together around the world, slowly puts the pieces together. Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the six survivors could not stay in New York, and went on to Cuba to work commercial trade routes. One of the men fell ill and passed away, but the others returned to the UK. By that point,



Ling Hee, Fang Lang, Lee Bing, Ah Lam. Image from *The Six*.

many young white men had been drafted into World War I, leaving many jobs to fill. In some cases, as with Fang Lang and his family, there’s a sense of the story coming full circle, while his some of his other compatriots suffered untimely deaths or perhaps disappeared from the record altogether.

Throughout the documentary, the themes of loss and trauma and how they pertain to history constantly swirl beneath the surface. Without active intervention, we lose important stories with each generation that passes on. Schwankert confronted this in having to rely on secondary and tertiary sources to bolster the limited information provided by historical documents. As a society we are confronting this now, losing the people who lived through World War II and its atrocities, and along with them a crucial part of history and the knowledge to guide future generations away from making the same mistakes.

And we can’t discuss history without also considering who writes it and who gets written about. Prior to Schwankert and his team’s efforts, very little was known about the Titanic’s Chinese passengers, yet we’ve all heard of Molly ‘The Unsinkable’ Brown.

What *The Six* uncovers about these enduring men reveals the ugly scars of this period

of history. We see the same scenario play out in the US, UK and Canada wherein Chinese immigrants provide essential labor for infrastructure and industry that enable Western society to thrive, only to be thrown under the bus by racist policies and legislation. While the US and Canada have, at least, publicly renounced these measures and taken baby steps toward reconciliation, the UK has yet to take any action regarding their forced repatriation of Chinese immigrants.

The Six feels contrived at times, adding unnecessary fluff because by nature of the subject there aren’t many living sources to provide conventional talking head commentary, but under Jones’ guidance, the survivors’ stories form a microcosm through which we can better understand an immigration saga that spans decades and countries. The film, like the research project, begins with a narrow focus but gradually zooms out and becomes a crash course in racist immigration policy that may feel old hat for those already familiar. Nonetheless, it’s important to contextualize these men’s stories because the same fears, prejudices and marginalization that they faced still persist today.

See page 26 for viewing details. ■