



BY
PHOEBE MAN

DOUBLE RAINBOWS

In their lives as in their art, Alex Law Kai-yui and Mabel Cheung Yuen-ting are a team. So when *Varsity* set out to interview the award-winning film-makers, we were a little disappointed that we were to meet only one half of the creative partnership. As luck would have it, we bumped into Law on our way to meet Cheung and he agreed to join us later.

For the next 60 minutes, the 56-year-old Law and 59-year-old Cheung showed all the ease of long-time collaborators, as they anticipated each other's answers and finished each other's sentences.

The pair first met while they were studying film at the New York University (NYU) and have taken turns as scriptwriter, producer and director on a series of films such as the *The Soong Sisters*, *City of Glass* and their earlier *Migration Trilogy*. The trilogy includes the critically and commercially acclaimed *An Autumn's Tale*, their biggest hit prior to their latest effort *Echoes of the Rainbow*, which won the Crystal Bear for the Best Film in the Generation Kplus (children and young people) category at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival.

Echoes of the Rainbow and its predecessor, *City of Glass*, are reminiscences about old Hong Kong. The couple says they wanted to show the subtle changes in society through the depiction of peer and cross-generation relationships of the time.

"The closer the human relationships the better, be it in a family or in a neighbourhood. Nowadays, people always talk about privacy. The cost of privacy is the lack of communication," Law says.

The film, which is based on Law's childhood, has struck a chord with audiences.

Law's calling came early. As a child, he played truant from school and was the frequent target of prefects. He found the cinema was the best place to hide from them. From his dark hiding place, his

dream of making his own films was thus gradually developed.

After graduating from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), he worked for Radio Television Hong Kong as an assistant director but was aware of his technical shortcomings. "Sometimes, the crew fooled me," he says. He decided to pursue further studies in film at NYU because he was both determined not to be fooled again and he wanted to experience the life abroad.

Unlike Law, Cheung says she never dreamed of becoming a film director when she was young. There were very few female directors at the time and people in this field were stereotyped as bad people, she says. Instead, she thought she would become a journalist after studying literature and psychology at HKU.

She never became a journalist. After she graduated, she applied for and won a scholarship to study drama and multimedia in the United Kingdom. In Britain, she got a job with British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a production assistant.

"I came to realise that one has to be cultivated and have a certain level of knowledge to make a film. It is totally not what people call a bad pursuit," she says.

A few years later, she decided to study film at NYU even though she was not sure if she had the money to finish the degree. There, she formed a bond with another poor Hong Kong film student, Alex Law.

During their years in New York, they had to adapt to a totally different environment to Hong Kong. In addition, Cheung noticed a big difference between the mindsets of Britons and Americans. "In Britain they stress that everything has to be elegant and artistic. They say if everybody understands your film, you're dead. But in America, things had better be less difficult. If audiences find it hard to understand your film, you're dead," she says.

Tuition fees were expensive, money was tight. To save money, they walked



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instead of taking the metro even when it snowed - but it was while they were walking that they discovered they enjoyed each other’s company. And they saved up their money for the movies - Law recalls how they skipped dinner and spent the two dollars in their pockets to see the Oscar-winning film *Amadeus*.

They also worked odd jobs in video rental and bookstores. Law sold kung fu movies in rough neighbourhoods while Cheung got a job at a Chinatown video rental store after the owner took pity on her penniless situation. It was the frequent encounters with illegal immigrants and triad members there that inspired them to make movies such as *Illegal Immigrant*.

Illegal Immigrant was originally intended as a graduation work only. But Cheung and Law came across Mona Fong Yat-wah, general manager of Shaw Brothers Studio, who promised to help them. Fong gave them HK\$1 million to make the film, which was shot within budget in America.

Law says their debut effort was the result of luck, but after that, things were never as easy again. Despite

winning numerous awards, the pair says they have always struggled to find investors for their films. Although she won Best Director in the 5th Hong Kong Film Awards for her first film, Cheung says it was very hard to find backers for their second film, *An Autumn’s Tale*. “When you choose to make non-mainstream films, you can be sure that you will face these kinds of problems,” she says.

Still, their attitude is positive. “One difficult step will be followed by one easy step, and vice versa,” Cheung says, as Law grins in agreement. The line is reiterated several times by the shoemaker’s wife in *Echoes of the Rainbow*. The Chinese character for shoes, *xié*, is composed of two parts: the left-hand part resembles *nan* (difficult times) and right-hand part *jia* (good times).

“Don’t think you can plan everything. Many things pop up from nowhere. This is fate,” says Cheung. “I never know what will happen tomorrow, and that’s the fun bit.” Right on cue, Law smiles and concurs: “You can’t force something to happen. If I get an award, it is a bonus.”

Although neither Cheung nor Law came from particularly privileged backgrounds, fate has not been so unkind. Both went to HKU at a time when some contemporaries were lucky to complete secondary school. And there has been criticism that some of their movies, particularly *City of Glass*, reek of elitism. Even in the supposedly realistic *Echoes of the Rainbow*, the older brother’s education in Diocesan Boys’ School may seem glorified and idealised to some.

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Law and Cheung are united in their rejection of the suggestion. “But I have the image of a *shui chai* (scoundrel),” Law protests. His partner is firm: “I hate people classifying films into different ideologies. I mean I don’t even think

of that when I make them.” Ideologies stifle creativity, says Cheung.

Cheung says her family was not rich, but her childhood was a happy one. She lived in a partitioned flat and shared a bed with her parents and four siblings. A radio was in the corridor; and everyone listened to it. At night, they listened to ghost stories and spooky tales. In the day, she liked to fly kites, kick shuttlecocks, play hopscotch and skip.

Cheung is the oldest child, and when her father passed away when she was around 14, she had to take up part-time jobs. Under such circumstances, she developed an independent character.

But her fun-loving side persisted, and against the backdrop of passionate student politics, Cheung she says she belonged steadfastly to the “carefree faction” at university.

Law, on the other hand, describes himself as something of a mischief-maker and rebel. He claims he stole plaques from the Chinese and English departments of HKU, and several bus-stop signs. He also participated in social campaigns and protested against Queen Elizabeth when she visited Hong Kong.

Filmography:	Alex Law	Mabel Cheung
The Illegal Immigrant (1985)	Writer	Director
An Autumn’s Tale (1987)	Writer	Director
Painted Faces (1988)	Director, Writer	Writer
Eight Taels of Gold (1989)	Writer	Director, Writer
Now You See It, Now You Don’t (1992)	Director, Writer	Director, Writer
The Soong Sisters (1997)	Writer	Director
City of Glass (1998)	Writer	Director
Beijing Rocks (2001)	Producer,	Director
Echoes of the Rainbow (2010)	Writer	Producer

Today, both have adopted a carefree but persevering attitude which keeps them going in the pursuit of their dreams and also keeps their creative partnership strong after all these years. They say there are no arguments on set because they are professionals with an understanding. “Back when we were still students, we made an agreement that only the director would make the final decision,” says Law.

Cheung adds: “There is no right or wrong in film-making, and thus nothing to argue about. The director has his own directions and takes, and you simply have to follow him.”

The couple says that in their personal lives, they each focus on their own things and have their own groups of friends. Cheung says she hangs out with her “Bitches’ Club”, while Law has his “Scoundrels’ Club”.

The two also have different plans for future work. Law has thought of venturing into the martial arts genre. “Each time I make a new movie, it will be a new life, a new experience.” Meanwhile, Cheung wants to consider basing her next film outside of Hong Kong. “You could say I have no roots, that I’m cosmopolitan. I have got used to travelling around the world. I hope I can adapt wherever I go.”

Varsity had been allocated 45 minutes for our interview. At the outset, Cheung said she felt numb from all the talking she has done since the success of *Echoes of the Rainbow*. But 60 minutes have passed before Cheung and Law wrap things up. “The road of film-making is hard, especially for our types of films, but we have grown to accept it as part of our life,” says Law, as he and Cheung leave for their next interview. ■