



Lohan off to jail, for real this time, judge says. **D2**

Joan Didion on writing of daughter's death. **D5**



Thursday, Nov. 3, 2011 ★ Section D



**Two rom-coms:** "Almost Perfect," at left, and "Wedding Palace," below, both at International House.

**"Dirty Hands: The Art and Crimes of David Choe,"** by director Harry Kim, chronicles the life and career of the street artist. Below, Edison Chen and Kelly Hu in Bertha Bay-Sa Pan's romantic comedy "Almost Perfect."



# SEVEN ASIAN NIGHTS

## The Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival, in its fourth run, is screening 10 features and 18 shorts through Tuesday.

By Tirdad Derakhshani  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**J**oe Kim spent most of his 20s suffering through "survival jobs."

"I worked as a temp, once even at an insurance company," the 33-year-old Cheltenham native recalls. His Dilbertian labors helped support his passion for filmmaking.

Kim has yet to make his first feature, but he already has made his mark with the dozens of movies he has hosted as founder of the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival. Now in its fourth year, the festival runs through Tuesday with screenings of 10 feature films and 18 shorts.

Created with little money and a lot of help from friends and family,

the festival has become one of the city's freshest film events.

Previously tucked into a single weekend, the festival, which also will feature five free receptions and live music, will be spread over seven nights.

Most films this year will be shown at the Ibrahim Theater at the International House in University City. See **FILM FESTIVAL** on D5

Film Festival

### Asian American Film Festival

Through Tuesday at International House, the Asian Arts Initiative, and the Prince Music Theater. Information: [www.phillyasianfilmfest.org/](http://www.phillyasianfilmfest.org/)



**Joe Kim, the film fest founder,** is a Cheltenham native who studied film at Temple.

# Film festival zooms in on Asian American culture

**FILM FESTIVAL** from D1 with some screenings and events taking place at the Asian Arts Initiative in Chinatown and the Prince Music Theater on the Avenue of the Arts.

"This year, we've really blown it out with more films and more days," says Kim.

Kim says he expects attendance to grow dramatically this year.

"Last year, we ended up scheduling it during the opening week of the Philadelphia Film Festival," says the Cheltenham High School graduate, "and that was not good."

He hopes to attract cinephiles from the larger festival, which winds down this week.

Kim, who studied film at Temple University, says he was inspired to create the festival after being invited to screen short films that he had made at the more than half a dozen Asian American festivals around the country.

He says he was impressed by the vibrant cultural scene at festivals in San Diego, Dallas, and Chicago.

"I went around all these Asian film festivals, and I realized how much it was helping the communi-

ty," he says.

"They offer a forum to watch and discuss interesting films about Asian Americans that you wouldn't see otherwise."

Kim's interest in revitalizing community spirit may be hereditary: His father, who moved here after fleeing North Korea in the early 1960s, was the pastor at the Korean United Church of Philadelphia until he retired seven years ago.

The Asian American festival opens Thursday with one of its biggest, most mainstream projects, *Wedding Palace*.

A sumptuously shot romantic dramedy, it's about a Korean American advertising executive in Los Angeles (Brian Tee) whose family pressures him to marry before he turns 30. He finds love in a most unexpected place when he meets, via the Web, a woman in Seoul, Korea. (*Oldboy's* Hye-jeong Kang).

"I guess you could call it the Korean American version of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*," Kim says of the film, which he hopes will have wide appeal. "It even features [comedian] Margaret Cho in a small but meaty role," Kim says with enthusiasm.

The fest is bookended by another romantic comedy, *Almost Perfect*, by New York writer-director Bertha Bay-Sa Pan (*Face*). It features the stunning Kelly Hu (*X-2*, *The Vampire Diaries*) as a too-busy-for-romance professional woman whose dysfunctional family threatens to ruin her one chance at love.

Celebrated Hong Kong action star Edison Chen (*Infernal Affairs*, *The Dark Knight*) plays her less-than-supportive brother.

"I got the idea for the story at a friend's wedding reception, when I met all these interesting characters," says Pan, who was born in New Brunswick and raised in Taipei, Taiwan.

Love — and a lot of steamy sex — is featured in the festival's centerpiece film, *The Girl From the Naked Eye*, a stylish neo-noir thriller co-written, coproduced and starring former kung fu and san-shu kickboxing champion Jason Yee.

Set in the Los Angeles nightclub scene, it's about a bodyguard whose best friend, a call girl, is found murdered.

"It's a big first feature," admits Yee of the \$1.5 million picture, which cos-

tars Dominique Swain, Gary Stretch, Ron Yuan, and Sasha Grey.

Love, familial and romantic, also is explored in Indian-born experimental filmmaker Sonali Gulati's documentary, *I Am*, a personal and political exploration of homosexuality in India, which did not decriminalize gay behavior until 2009.

In the film, Gulati, who was born and raised in New Delhi, returns home after her mother's death.

"My inability to come out to my mother as a lesbian before she died serves as the primary motivation to making the film," says Gulati, who earned an MFA in film from Temple and now teaches film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

She says interviews with "parents of other gay and lesbian people living in India" complement her personal story.

Hip-hop infuses one of the festival's most impressive movies, *Bang Bang*, which writer-director Byron Chan made for less than \$70,000.

Described as the Asian American *Boyz n the Hood*, the drama is an intimate look at Asian American gangs in Los Angeles.

*Bang Bang* stars Vietnamese-

American hip-hop star and actor Thai Ngo (*Baby*) as a rapper who wants to break away from gang life to pursue his music.

"I based a lot of the stories on my own experience with gang members," says Chang, 26, a San Jose, Calif., native whose mother, a working-class single mother, emigrated to California from China.

"A lot of [gang] movies are about race," he says, "but class is a bigger issue" in the film, says Chang, who studied film at the University of California in San Diego.

"I'm especially proud that a lot of the actors in the film are real gang members and former gang members," he says.

Joe Kim says he has great hopes for the festival, which has grown from a part-time passion to a full-time job.

He'll also continue to direct his own shorts. None of his own works, he says, is featured in the festival.

"I'm not at the level of these filmmakers," he says. "Yet."

---

Contact staff writer Tirdad Derakhshani at 215-854-2736 or [tirdad@phillynews.com](mailto:tirdad@phillynews.com).