#### AN ALLEGORICAL TALE



# EARLY PRAISE

## A "HEART-WRENCHING THRILLER" – San Francisco Chronicle

# "THE BEST MOVIE OF ITS KIND SINCE GHOST"

### "POIGNANT AND EMOTIONALLY GRIPPING"

"LAWRENCE KAO'S PERFORMANCE IS NOTABLE AND ONE OF THE BEST I'VE SEEN DURING THIS YEAR'S FESTIVAL"

"SHINE[S] A LIGHT ON LIFE IN NEW AND UNEXPECTED WAYS... HIGHLY <u>RECOMMENDED</u>"

– Film Threat

– Pop Culturist

– Arman Film

– Unseen Films

# FESTIVALS







Featured in "8 MUST–WATCH MOVIES AT CINEQUEST" –S.F. Chronicle











**Opening Night Film** 





THE PAST FEW YEARS, MARKED BY A TROUBLING RISE IN ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE, SERVES AS THE IMPETUS OF OUR FILM.

BUT RATHER THAN A STRAIGHTFORWARD STORY OF OPPRESSION, WE'VE VENTURED INTO THE REALM OF THE SUPERNATURAL AND UNCANNY.

BA IS AN UNORTHODOX MEDITATION ON THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, INTERTWINING REALITY AND FANTASY TO EXPLORE ISSUES OF INVISIBILITY, SINGLE PARENTHOOD, AND POVERTY.

It's a journey into empathy, daring to ask if we can feel for the embodiment of Death, leaning into and then smashing the stereotype of the "Chinese Virus."



# LOGINE

When a struggling father makes a Faustian bargain and becomes the incarnation of Death, he must fight to unwind his fate while keeping his predicament hidden from his daughter.

> RUNTIME: 79 MINUTES GENRE: DARK FANTASY DRAMA / HORROR REALISM COUNTRY: USA YEAR: 2024





# SYNOPSIS





Daniel Li (30s) and Collette (8) are without options, money, or a home. In a desperate bid to secure his daughter's future, Daniel unwittingly accepts a chilling role - becoming Death itself. He undergoes a haunting physical transformation and learns the hard way that anything he touches will perish.



Adapting to this cursed experience, Daniel shrouds every inch of his skin, lies about his profession, and sets rigid boundaries for Collette to keep her safe. All the while working to undo his fate.







DANIEL MUST REMAIN UNSEEN WHILE DOING THE CRUCIAL WORK OF TRANSPORTING THE LIVING TO THE DEAD, ALL WHILE TRYING TO PROVIDE FOR HIS DAUGHTER. HE SPENDS HIS DAYS UNNOTICED, NEITHER HERE NOR THERE. THE FILM REFLECTS HIS PURGATORY STATE, EXISTING IN DUSK, DAWN, AND NIGHT HOURS, IN ABANDONED STREETS AND HOSPICES.



IN THE LATE NIGHT HOURS, HE OFTEN FINDS HIMSELF DOUBTING WHETHER OR NOT HIS LABOR AND DEDICATION TO HIS CHILD IS ENOUGH.



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT





As I type this Director's Statement my daughter climbs on me and says, "Why are you always working? I wish I could play with you..."

It's statements like these that make me ask what makes a good father? Is it providing — food on a table, new shoes for school, a warm bed at night? Or is it quality time together that truly matters in the end? What seems so simple to answer, really isn't. Ever since my daughter was born I've wrestled with these questions and my priorities. This film is a personal and heightened exploration into this dilemma.





Additionally, as Asian Americans experience both increases in racially-motivated violence and disproportional economic fallout over the past few years, the humanization of my people is more necessary than ever. At the core of Ba is a human and universal tale of survival between an Asian American father and daughter, a relationship Western audiences rarely get to see.



# EARLY PRESS



KPIX BAY AREA BACKSTAGE 3/8/2024



CBS NEWS LOS ANGELES 3/26/2024



"Cinequest 2024: 8 Must-Watch Movies" SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE DATEBOOK 3/6/2024

"Michael Paul Chan Reflects on the Evolution of AAPI Representation Onscreen" SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE DATEBOOK 3/7/2024

"Writer-Director Benjamin Wong and Producer Elizabeth Ai Discuss Their Must-See Film, Ba" POP CULTURIST 3/28/2024



"'Ba' Captures the Invisible Struggle of Asian American Parents" MOCHI MAGAZINE 3/28/2024

# DIRECTOR Q&A

1. What is Ba about?

On its surface, Ba is about a young dad struggling to make ends meet, making desperate and sometimes questionable choices to provide for his daughter. Underneath it's an allegorical tale about the living embodiment of Death, mixing reality and fantasy to explore Asian American life, single fatherhood, class and invisibility. It's about seeing the world through someone else's eyes even when it's uncomfortable, while confronting and deconstructing the stereotype of the "Chinese Virus."

#### 2. How did the idea for Ba start?

Ba was inspired by my own experience of becoming a dad. Nobody really talks about how hard it is. I think there's a lot of conversation about the challenges of motherhood but for fatherhood there's still a general notion of sucking it up and not complaining. At least for me that's how it was. I had a really hard time navigating it all, but I'd do anything for my kids.

I think that's where the meat of a good story lives. Taking a personal experience and multiplying it. What would be an incredibly difficult situation as a father? You're busy working all the time. Not only that but you can't hug your kid or even show yourself. Getting to see your lived experience magnified on a large canvas, it's one of the satisfactions of storytelling.

But then the pandemic happens. All these terrible scenarios I'm imagining masking up, social distancing, overwhelming loss of life - become real. The feeling of othering as an Asian person in America. Even though the story isn't explicitly about COVID, so much of that real-life experience from the cast and crew seeps into the screen. There's this undercurrent of loneliness that we can all relate to.

I've also always been a huge fan of genre. I never thought of telling a straightforward drama. In a way, it feels right exploring all these fears and dark emotions within the space of fantasy and horror. There's a rich history of passing dark fantastical stories via spoken word, across all cultures. They were the original fairy tales. Not the sanitized versions we get today. I think getting to explore our darkest worries and horrors is something we all crave. This film explores my innermost fears as a parent, really.

3. What was the significance of the title of the film, and how does it relate to the story?

"Ba" is Chinese for Dad. It's what Collette lovingly calls her father. It also encapsulates all his roles - father, provider, Asian, Death. There's this fundamental tension between how she sees him and what he does.

It's also the only Chinese word they use when they talk. While ethnically they're Chinese I would say they're very Americanized overall. It's one of the few fragments of their background that's stuck. Like my family, growing up we always spoke English, but once in a while a Chinese word would pop up when it was a better way to express something.

#### DIRECTOR Q&A, CONTINUED

4. Can you provide some insights into the themes of your feature film?

A big theme is about the intersection of being a father and Asian in America.

There aren't many portrayals of loving and caring Asian fathers on screen. In our story, Daniel starts out as single father of the year. He never misses a soccer game or recital; he's confident, a star dancer. He makes a single bad decision, and slowly becomes worn down by the psychic weight of being an Asian man in America. Asians have always been burdened by expectations to be quiet, submissive, hard working, unseen. Daniel slowly descends into the most extreme version of this - he literally covers himself, hides in the shadows, doing exhausting and thankless work. Stripped of his former self, he begins doubting his own worth as father, and actually believes his daughter would be better off with an all-American family.

5. What was the most challenging aspect of bringing this story to life on screen?

Just the length of time it took to make this. When I started pursuing filmmaking I never thought I would spend almost a decade writing. 98% of that time is spent alone in my thoughts. You can't help but be plagued by self doubt. I naturally like things done quickly. I love the rush of making something for a week or month and then getting immediate feedback.

Making a film is like the world's longest high intensity marathon. Once my producer friend Elizabeth Ai came on board, we got delayed by Covid. Then after production, it was a year before reshoots. And then a year and a half for post. Now there's festivals, and finding distribution. Maintaining that focus and championing your own project for what seems like forever doesn't come easy to me. I'd much rather sprint, relax, then repeat. In a way the whole thing is like parenting. It's about showing up every day, being consistent, over years and years. I'm still learning but I think I've gotten better over time.

6. How did you go about developing the father and daughter characters and their arcs throughout the film?

Fifteen years ago there were essentially no Asians on screen. This was before the internet so it really was a wasteland of Asian representation. This show comes on MTV called America's Best Dance Crew. It's the show that made the jabbawockeez famous. All the best dancers are AAPI - they're incredible, they're sexy, they're cool. I can't understate how huge it was. It was a huge leap forward. That show and moment are indelibly marked in my mind.

There was nothing that came close to it for years. Fast forward a decade when I'm writing this story. I'm imagining a character who had been on a show like that. Lived famously for a few years but then fell on hard times. It's something I can relate to; careers in entertainment can be so fleeting. What would it feel like to peak and then wallow in obscurity afterwards, struggling to make ends meet? *Continued...* 

#### DIRECTOR Q&A, CONTINUED

#### 6. Continued...

During casting, this actor really pops. I learn he's an ex-dancer. In fact, he used to be on a dance crew named Kaba Modern. The very same Kaba Modern that was on MTV's Best Dance Crew. Everything came full circle. Lawrence has lived this character's life and was destined for this role.

So much of Collette's character is informed by my daughter. And Kai, who plays her, brought so much to the character as well. The entire process is hugely collaborative. For the arcs, there's the initial idea, then lots of rewriting and editing. The old adage rings true: you make the film three times - during writing, production, and editing. It's endlessly fascinating. Sometimes you'll write all this backstory or motivation and then your brilliant actor comes in and gives a single look. With that look you can throw out the previous three pages, and it's so much better. I'd love to say I planned and executed everything to a T, but the reality is there is so much discovery and a lot of trusting your intuition. I have so much appreciation and respect for our editors Alex and Selinda. They're true story tellers. The editing is just as integral to the story as the directing and writing.

7. What techniques did you use to create the dark atmosphere and ominous tone that you wanted for the film?

Visually our cinematographer Ming deserves so much credit for really nailing

the dark atmosphere. We were always riding the line of, "how dark can we go while still feeling emotionally rich?" Our production designer Emily did amazing work on a shoestring budget. And our sound editor Sung Rok, I really believe sound is the secret weapon to shaping our emotions when watching a film. He's a true artist. There's also the city of LA itself. We shot so much in the industrial corners of the city, during the pandemic, and it's just this beautiful abandoned wasteland. It's the mirror opposite of all the glitzy glamorous parts of LA, and I love it.

8 What was your favorite moment or scene to shoot, and why?

There's a few moments that stand out. One was shooting at 3am in an abandoned industrial part of LA, in an area completely awash in graffiti. Watching Lawrence dance alone in the empty streets, in the middle of the pandemic, everything quiet and still, juxtaposed against his beautiful movement. The pandemic feels like an eternity ago and that area isn't the same since being covered by the new Sixth Street bridge. It just feels like a singular moment in time that'll never happen again.

There were also a couple emotional scenes with Kai. To be that young and that talented - she's a phenom. I remember just watching her on the monitor and being in awe. One day I think I'll be able to look back and be proud that our film was her first starring role. A huge shout out to our casting directors Krisha and Jamie for finding her and our phenomenal cast.

#### DIRECTOR Q&A, CONTINUED

9. Can you share any interesting or memorable anecdotes from behind the scenes of filming?

Technically this isn't from our film set, but Michael Paul Chan, who has a wonderful performance as Sonny, told me this when we were filming. I hope he doesn't mind me sharing it here. Michael's had a long and illustrious career with over a hundred roles over four plus decades including memorable characters in The Goonies and The Joy Luck Club. He told me that for the first twenty years of his career, until The Joy Luck Club, they never let him use his real speaking voice - he always had to put on an accent! Twenty freaking years! It's insane. It says so much about Hollywood for so long and his career as a pioneer. He's an amazing actor and I feel so indebted to the groundwork he's laid for the next generation.

10. Can you discuss any specific scenes or sequences that were particularly meaningful or challenging to film?

The schedule was very tight. And the tightest part was filming the finale in two days. I can't remember the number of setups but it was very high. You're running off a cocktail of adrenaline and anxiety. Credit to our team that got us through it. Another thing is I learned that if it doesn't feel totally right on the page, you can't hide it. There was a scene that, if I'm being honest, always felt a little lacking. I told myself we could make it work on the day. But it was self-deception. It didn't feel 100% right during filming and it didn't work in the edit. Ultimately we made it happen with the help of reshoots and more editing but it's certainly a lesson learned.

Ironically I would say you need a certain degree of self-deception in all of this, a belief that it'll all work big-picture-wise, but not necessarily on the details.

11. Were there any specific directors or films that influenced your approach to this project?

Biutiful, with its more grounded approach to horror, is certainly a touchstone. Eraserhead and its sonic soundscape was a big inspiration when working with Sung Rok. It was thrilling to see how far we could push the sound to change the whole film. Chloe Zhao, the Dardenne Brothers, Andrea Arnold, Sean Baker - I'm a big fan of their naturalistic approach to performances.

12. Can you explain why you chose to end the film where you did, and what message or feelings you hope audiences will take away from watching this film?

I think love endures. [SPOILER ALERT] Yes it's sad that he's no longer alive but he'll always be there, in a pure state of love, and she'll always feel that. It's a metaphor that the love from a parent is something children will always carry even after their parent is gone. There's something beautiful about that.





## DANIEL

#### PLAYED BY LAWRENCE KAO

Lawrence first made waves as a ground-breaking Asian American dancer on MTV's America's Best Dance Crew, and has since starred in The Purge, The Walking Dead, Wu Assassins and Walker: Independence.

A struggling single-father with great humanity. Ten years ago he was a charismatic young dancer with endless potential. Now without money nor home, he struggles to raise and protect his troubled young daughter.

Daniel undergoes a haunting physical transformation and becomes filled with selfloathing and doubt. Ultimately he finds affirmation through his one true light – his daughter, Collette.



## COLLETTE

PLAYED BY KAI CECH (AMERICAN GIRL: CORINNE TAN, MARVELOUS AND THE BLACK HOLE, DEAR SANTA)

Misunderstood at school and haunted by unseen forces, 8 year old Collette is timid and shy – but finds solace through dance. Through a series of difficult trials she discovers a calmness and strength from within. Armed with newfound determination, she becomes the rock in her most important relationship – the one with her father.



## SONNY

PLAYED BY MICHAEL PAUL CHAN (THE JOY LUCK CLUB, THE GOONIES, HELLO TOMORROW!)

Sonny, a corner store owner, has always felt more comfortable with the outcasts who drift by late at night than the regular Jane's and Joe's. If he's comfortable with you he'll reveal a tender and compassionate side, and if you're really lucky he'll crack a few jokes.



# TOKENMAN

PLAYED BY BRIAN THOMPSON (THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH, THE X-FILES, COBRA)

Obliged to be a cog in the Death's machination, the Token Man is Daniel's sole link to understanding the deadly consequences if he dare stray off his indentured role.



## MACEY

PLAYED BY SHELLI BOONE

Compassionate despite seeing more than her fair share of it all. Inspired by her own experience as a foster child, Macey is a pragmatic yet compassionate CPS officer. After experiencing a series of miscarriages, she's all but given up hope at starting her own family.



# BRAD

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Played by Jonathan Medina (Primo)

Macey's overly supportive husband. Brad very much regards himself a caring and supportive husband and family man. He has a distinct idea of what family life is like, and will do anything within his control to live out that idea – others be damned.





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#### A "HEART-WRENCHING THRILLER"

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE







# STILSDOWNLOAD

Download movie stills + headshots (.zip) »





# TEAM



## BENJAMIN WONG



Writer / Director

Benjamin Wong is an award-winning creative director turned filmmaker. Benjamin has directed a variety of video and animation campaigns for Smithsonian, MTV and AT&T, and received numerous Webby and Addy awards. He has studied acting with East West Players and been a member of the Cold Tofu improv team. After taking a pause from directing to focus on writing, raising a family, and developing a line of visual storytelling apps, Benjamin is back directing his first feature film. Sparked by his experience being othered as an Asian American during the pandemic while raising a child, Ba is a genre-bending film that intertwines fantasy and reality.

## ELIZABETH AI



Producer

Elizabeth Ai is a Chinese-Vietnamese-American Los Angeles based Emmy award-winning producer. She writes, directs, and produces independent narratives as well as branded content for companies such as National Geographic, ESPN, and VICE. She produced documentary features; DIRTY HANDS: THE ART & CRIMES OF DAVID CHOE (2008), on the titled artist after his prison release and before his meteoric rise and A WOMAN'S WORK: THE NFL'S CHEERLEADER PROBLEM (2019), which examines wage theft and exploitation of the only visible NFL women. Additionally, she produced <u>SAIGON ELECTRIC</u> (2011), a feature narrative set in Vietnam's world of breakdancing. During her tenure at VICE, she created the original pilot for <u>BONG APPÉTIT</u> (2014), which got picked up for series on Viceland. She's currently directing and producing two in-progress feature documentaries and has a slate of narratives in development. She's a fellow of Berlin Talent Campus, Film Independent, Sundance, and Tribeca. Her film projects are supported by California Humanities, Firelight Media, Knight Foundation, and ITVS. She received her B.A. from the University of Southern California.



## TRACY CHITUPATHAM



Producer

Tracy Chitupatham has created content for Vice Media, Hulu, Disney, Awesomeness and brands such as BMW, Neutrogena, Hollister, Covergirl and more. She has played an integral role in Emmy awardwinning content for National Geographic and ESPN. She Co-Produced a feature film, THERE IS A NEW WORLD SOMEWHERE, which garnered 'Best Feature' at the LA Asian Pacific Film Festival. She was an Associate Producer for the feature film adaptation of YELLOW FACE, a critically acclaimed play by playwright David Henry Hwang. Her latest feature film she produced, DAUGHTER, will release in 2021. Her latest feature length documentary projects, currently in development, are about the Asian-American assimilation experience. She is also a seasoned Line Producer/Unit Production Manager and is a member of the Director's Guild of America. Aside from her work in the film industry, Tracy volunteers for non-profit organization Women of Color Unite!

## MING JUE HUE

Cinematographer

Ming is an Asian-American cinematographer based in New York. In 2018, he was selected as "Rising Stars of Cinematography" by American Cinematographer Magazine, and joined DDA Talent Agency. Ming's father was an oil painting artist who lived a nomad lifestyle in many cities in the world. As a result, he got to experience various cultures through the art of painting and is still inspired by the great masters from the past. During his studies at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, he decided to focus on cinematography under the mentorship of Geoffrey Erb, ASC. In 2014 the feature film, M Cream, won Best Feature Film Award at Rhode Island International Film Festival. It also took home the Best Cinematography Award at Madrid International Film Festival. Besides features, Ming has also shot numerous shorts and his work has screened at festivals worldwide, including Cannes, AFI, Palm Spring, and Clermont- Ferrand etc.

## ALEX BUSHE

Editor

Alex Bushe is a Los Angeles-based editor and assistant editor, who has extensive experience in both documentary and narrative filmmaking. He has worked with editor Joe Bini for eight years on more than a dozen films, most notably on several films with director Werner Herzog. Other notable films he has worked on include Nick Broomfield's "Tales of the Grim Sleeper", Andrea Arnold's "American Honey", and Lynne Ramsay's recently completed noir thriller "You Were Never Really Here". In 2014, Bushe was invited to participate as an assistant editor at the Sundance Institute's Documentary Edit and Story Labs.

Bushe currently divides his time between editing "Guangzhou Love Story", an observational PBS documentary about an African-Chinese family navigating China's xenophobic society, and directing the film "Nomansland", a documentary about a mysterious uninhabited island off the northeastern coast of the United States.

## KENNETH CALHOUN



SFX & Makeup

Kenneth's love of Special FX and makeup started at a very early age. Growing up, he loved the creations of Ray Harryhausen and Toho giant monster movies. At 14, he was inspired by a show at Universal Studios to take his love of creatures and makeup seriously by starting to become a special fx makeup artist. He studied and practiced constantly. He would watch Stan Winston School DVDs to the point where he could recite the whole lesson word for word. After winning a local makeup fx competition, he started doing makeup for independent films in his native Washington State.

At the age of 22, Kenneth moved to Los Angeles, getting his professional start working at Legacy Effects. Hired to make the prosthetic transfers for "Terminator Genisys", he started out working in the foam and silicone department under Cory Czekaj, where he was given the name "Super Ken". During that time he also had the chance to work on "Jurassic World" and "Avengers: Age of Ultron".

Kenneth's work can also be seen in the films "The Shape of Water", "Captain Marvel", "X- Men: Dark Phoenix", "The Revenant", and "Goosebumps 2", and television shows "Young Sheldon", "Grey's Anatomy", and "The Mandalorian", to name a few.

## GREG BERNALL & CHRIS UPTON



Composers

Greg Bernall and Chris Upton are composers, music producers, writers, and best friends. Their friendship started playing in bands throughout Los Angeles more than a decade ago. The two quickly realized that they had a creative kinship that translated not just to music and songwriting but art and movies as well. Using each other's unique skill-sets Chris and Greg started composing music for commercials, brands, short films, and video games for clients like Google, FX, HULU, Paramount Pictures, and Apple. With a strong focus on unique storytelling and a DIY ethic, their music has earned them awards in film festivals for best original music as well as catching the attention of up and coming directors like Theresa Bennett (Social Animals) and Gandja Monteiro (The Chi). Through their experience as songwriters and composers, Greg and Chris' unique perspective brings their stories and ideas to life.

## SUNGROK CHOI

Sound Design & Sound Editing

Sung Rok Choi is a sound designer and re-recording mixer based in Los Angeles. He started his career as a sound editor for South Korean feature films including "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" (dir. Park Chan-wook) and "Barking Dog Never Bites" (dir. Bong Joon-ho). He continued his work as a rerecording mixer focusing on dialogue mixing on various films including "Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War", "A Good Lawyer's Wife" and "The Classic". In 2005, Sung Rok was the Supervising Sound Editor and Mixer for the film "Tale of Cinema" (dir. Hong Sang-soo) which was nominated for a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. He began his MFA at USC's School of Cinematic Art in 2006 and ever since, he has continued his career as a Sound Designer and Mixer on fiction and documentary films such as "Snowpiercer" (dir. Bong Joon-ho), "The Million Dollar Duck" (Animal Planet), "Who is Arthur Chu?" (Slamdance 2017), "August at Akiko's" (Rotterdam 2018), "A Woman's Work" (Tribeca 2019), "37 Seconds" (Berlinale & Netflix 2019), "I Was A Simple Man" (Sundance 2021). Sung Rok was nominated for an MPSE Award in 2010, 2011 and 2020.

#### LAURA CHOI Associate Producer



#### EMILY PETERS Production Designer



#### KIMBERLY HWANG Line Producer

#### STEPHANIE NILLES Production Manager





#### IRENE JEONG Costume Designer

#### FREDERICK GOURGUE 1st AD





#### CARIPAK Script Supervisor

#### NANCY NGUYEN Producers' Assistant







We are proud of our film's diverse and inclusive hiring practices. Our cast is 70% BIPOC with 40% AAPI, and our two leads are Asian American. Our crew is over 60% female/non-binary with a majority-BIPOC crew.



# THANK YOU

We've poured our souls into our little film and appreciate you taking the time!





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Film Instagram: ba\_feature\_film iMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/ttl4757664/ Letterboxd: https://letterboxd.com/film/ba-1/

# 

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