

Interview: Director Rujanee Mahakanjana Reflects Her ‘Parallel Universe’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 13, 2010 - 1:02pm

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CHICAGO – Last year, a documentary premiered here at the Gene Siskel Film Center, provocatively entitled “Man and His Erections.” The writer/director of the film is Rujanee Mahakanjana, an artist and designer who has been exploring filmmaking in the last five years. Her latest feature, premiering this week, is “Parallel Universe.”

Mahakanjana was born in Bangkok, Thailand, and has been in the U.S. since her teenage years. Her background in architecture and interior design led to the formation of her “Rujanee in Space” studio. Her Masters degree studies led her to filmmaking, a short experimental piece called “Random Seating.” The expansion of this journey led to her documentary Man and His Erections, a treatise on monumental building design, that featured a sharp and comedic fictional narrative about an adult film star who has lost his organic structure.



Both Sides Now: Ed Meanan as Mit and Tim in ‘Parallel Universe’
Photo credit: Rujanee in Space Studio

Parallel Universe, her latest film, is an exploration of duality, as a cognitive-behavioral psychologist who begins to have visions of a dreamlike double reality. His metaphoric life is as a Thai transvestite bathroom janitor in an unknown train station. The second life is full of familiar people from his “real” existence, and that leads him to discover his own meaning and purpose in being.

HollywoodChicago.com sat down for an interview with writer/director Rujanee Mahakanjana, in anticipation of the premiere of Parallel Universe on Saturday, December 18th, at Gorilla Tango Theater in Chicago.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a self-described fascination with existentialism. What sense of that philosophy were you exploring in your production of Parallel Universe?

Rujanee Mahakanjana: I’ve always questioned the meaning of life because I was raised Buddhist, and I think that gives me a lot of

background in wanting to pursue that meaning. Questioning the purpose is something the Buddha teaches, but right now I'm not going to label myself as anything. I am disconnected from Buddhism, but still follow the principles.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a person who has lived in a parallel universe herself, living in both your native Thailand and the United States Midwest, what lessons have you taught yourself about life in those two distinct realities?

Mahakanjana: There wasn't much parallel between the life here and there, those lives are completely different. It's as if each life becomes the metaphor for the other one. The story in the film is about a psychologist who is trying to understand life through his clients, but the same time he has his own complexities. Through me, it's an interpretation of him trying to find himself through another life. The character is a combination of me and a psychologist I know.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your film, the main character is living as both a prominent psychologist and a Thai transvestite. Besides your relationship with psychology in your biography, what inspired you to go to the other extreme of the transvestite character, who in themselves are living a double life?

Mahakanjana: The transvestite character is there to provoke the question of sexual identity, trying to get beyond the importance of labels. If a man is a transvestite, presumably both man and woman, then certain things are expected from each role.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of themes of your film explores the meaning of existence. Why do you think it is important for us as a species to navigate that meaning within our consciousness. Do you in fact admire those who don't believe or think in that way, or does existence itself keep defining meaning no matter how a person lives?

Mahakanjana: I ask myself that question all the time. [laughs] I think understanding the meaning of our existence here, will also help us understand ourselves and others in a deeper connection. Looking beyond the superficial layer, everybody has there own life purpose, and in reaching for that we can add more meaning to both their lives and our lives. When you die, you can feel more happy when you die. [laughs] You don't regret that you're here.

HollywoodChicago.com: It is said that males and females both have traits of the other gender. How do you think your male side manifests itself in your life or art?

Mahakanjana: I understand my 'male' side in the fact that I was raised not to be too 'girly.' My father always said not to exhibit a feminine weakness in the outside world, because you'd be taken advantage of, because we lived in Bangkok. [laughs] There is no line between male or female in roles for me, it is blurred, especially in the ability to do something.



Director Rujanee Mahakanjana (left) with Special Effects Coordinator Cesar Pardo on the set of 'Parallel Universe'
Photo credit: Rujanee in Space Studio

HollywoodChicago.com: Your first foray into film, the short 'Random Seating' was somewhat accidental, an extension of your art and design work. What clicked within you while you were doing the film that led to next one, and now seems like your life's work?

Mahakanjana: It happened even before that, while I was studying for my Masters of Fine Arts, when I came up with the idea for Random Seating. I didn't have access to filmmakers in DeKalb [Northern Illinois University], so I was formulating the piece and finally wrote the script.

As I made the connections to get the production going, I really started to like it. What I want to say in my art and design, it always takes time, so why do a static thing when I can put everything in motion in a film and it tells more of a story about what I want to say. It's a great storytelling tool for anything.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your first full-length film was called Man and His Erections, which was mostly a straight documentary about architecture, but also featured a fictional narrative featuring a porn star that was having trouble with his ‘abilities’ in that realm. What led you to the decision to include the porn actor’s segment, and what sense of communication were you endeavoring to achieve with the scenario?

Mahakanjana: It was a comparison between the architecture aspect when men are involved, looking at the Trump Tower and The Spire [never built] here in Chicago. The porn star narrative came later. It came out as I was writing and planning the documentary. I realized as I was looking at the initial footage, that while it was educational and interesting, I thought someone outside architecture would probably be bored. The metaphor of architecture having an erectile dysfunction coupled with the male sexuality was the comparison, and when you look deeper into the cause of erectile dysfunction in architecture, whether it was designed and not built, or doesn't make sense or work together.

HollywoodChicago.com: The porn actor’s sequences in Man and His Erections are quite different than the look of the rest of the film. Was that intentional?

Mahakanjana: It was intentional, because most porn videos are corny and quirky, and has a falseness to them. So I had the actor have the fake mustache so you could tell it was false. It expressed the characteristic of the porn, compared with the polish of the documentary part.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what event or aspect of your life has most shaped your artistic sensitivity. If our lives are the sum of its parts, which sum gain had the most explosive influence on your abiding nature as an artist?

Mahakanjana: I think everything has come from when I was younger, and in most Asian countries they value everything through material. I was brought up in that realm, but I always questioned that. That was the starting point of me questioning the meaning of it, and trying to find answers through discovery. I was into art, then switched to design to make money, but it wasn't fulfilling enough. I went back to the art side with university studies, and it has fulfilled more of what I wanted to say, and I felt more connected it.

I felt that my work improved a lot in those years of study, after that I could take it to the real world and find a message in it. The search for the meaning of life is still there, no matter what art that I do, it is the message beyond the obvious.

“Parallel Universe” premieres Saturday, December 18th at 5pm at the Gorilla Tango Theater, 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, and will also have screenings on December 19th (5pm) and December 21st (6:30 and 8pm). Featuring Ed Meanan, Petrucia Finker, Alex Kazhinsky, Tif Alexius, Danny Glenn, Christain Wadie and Denise Smolarek, written and directed by Rujanee Mahakanjana.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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