

## Interview: Director Rujanee Mahakanjana Takes a Different Route to ‘Lab 99’

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CHICAGO – Director Rujanee Mahakanjana has created some atypical and artistic statements in her film career. Her studio Nebula Creatives represents that work, which includes the short films “Random Seating” and “Out of Sight,” and feature films “Man and His Erections” and “Parallel Universe.” She is taking a different route to her next film, “Lab 99,” with a creative process that utilizes the comic book format.

The beginnings of the screenplay for “Lab 99” began in 2010, and nearly made it to a production. When that didn’t come to fruition, Mahakanjana – through an idea from “Lab 99” producer Christian Stanfield – moved the screenplay to a comic book format. This allowed the narrative, about outer space aliens and their counterparts on earth, to expand into a visual medium. As Mahakanjana explains below, that gave her and the creative team room to further develop the story, and brought it to another level.



Comic Book Image from ‘Lab 99,’ Written by Rujanee Mahakanjana and Christian Stanfield

*Photo credit: Nebula Creatives*

Rujanee Mahakanjana is a native of Bangkok, Thailand, and has been in the states since her teenage years. Besides being a film director and producer, she is a steward of Nebula Creatives, and curates a yearly film festival called Shortcut 100, spotlighting short films from around the world. She spoke to HollywoodChicago.com about her new project, and its road to production.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** After taking a conventional route through your first feature films to produce them, you are creating a new strategy for ‘Lab 99.’ What is the origin of this path, and how do you think it will literally make a better film in the end?

**Rujanee Mahakanjana:** I’ve been working on the screenplay for ‘Lab 99’ for six years. It’s become a very rich and visually unique world, and in converting it to a comic book form I’ve been able to further explore all those elements. The producer on the film, Christian Stanfield, came up with the idea because he felt it would help to further understand the characters and their world more deeply.



The comic book focuses on the backstories of some of the main characters and is a prequel of sorts to the film. Telling its story has definitely begun to inform and evolve the screenplay. What the aliens look like, the lab itself and how they all got there, has begun to become more clear and purposeful.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the inspiration for 'Lab 99,' and where did that inspiration come from?

**Mahakanjana:** Around 2010, there were many life changing events that were happening to me. As a result I started exploring more deeply and existentially what I wanted to do with my next project. I started writing the story based on those experiences I was having at the time, and it got close to being produced as a feature film. It ended up not happening, but I think it was for the best because it wasn't the right time and the right people involved. Since then the story has evolved quite a bit, and I now have the right people on board.

In the past year the theme of the story has really come together. It started with my feelings in my life about not fitting in, not wanting to conform and do or be what everyone tells you to be, but it's become much more universal, and I think a lot of people will be able to relate to it. What I'm saying in 'Lab 99' is don't give up and stay focused and you can be who you were meant to be and make your dreams come true.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have a fascination with science fiction, or the art of creating an atmosphere based on the inner workings of your character's existence. How is the inner story – the thoughts, emotions and motivations of the characters – as important as the outer story?

**Mahakanjana:** The philosophy in my past work has always been an 'inside/out' approach, and for 'Lab 99' I wanted a more literal concept of 'outer space.' The transformations in the story that take place in the inner realms of the characters are very much tied to those outside of themselves and even outside of the earth. The characters change from human to alien, and alien to human – it's a external transformation, but it affects them internally as well.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What will be the overriding theme in 'Lab 99' and how does it coincide with your overall artistic journey?



Rujanee Mahakanjana of 'Lab 99'

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Mahakanjana:** Duality is something I've explored in my previous films, and it's certainly present in 'Lab 99' – the duality of the human/alien world, and its presence between the characters as these shifts take place. The main character Siri is going through similar life situations as a character that comes before her. They are both fighting to break free of their world.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** After creating some fairly wild and surreal art in your features 'Man and His Erections' and 'Parallel Universe,' you presented a more conventional narrative in your short film 'Out of Sight.' Why the shift in direction?

**Mahakanjana:** 'Out of Sight' has its own duality – I like to have characters who have similar circumstances in different situations, and try to come to a corresponding resolution. There are parallel characters in 'Out of Sight' named Vivian and Julie. In the story, they're both missing something, and my goal was to get the viewer to see more into their characters, to focus on them through the viewer's own personal experiences. We all follow a path in life, I'm just trying to show a different way of looking at it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Funding is always an issue for a filmmaker. How will this unconventional funding path for 'Lab 99' hopefully be a wave for the future?

**Mahakanjana:** First, I think ‘Lab 99’ has a lot of potential, the potential to grow into other media elements, if you’re talking about business. It has to be executed properly, and it needs the right people and the right elements to come together, and of course to do that you need funding. The comic book starting point can be the tip to an inverted pyramid, it can grow outward.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you dealt with alternative realities in your excellent film ‘Parallel Universe,’ how do you see the alternate Rujanee? What is she doing, where is she and who is she while she’s there?

**Mahakanjana:** That’s interesting, and I’ve had other people ask me that, especially in the context of my own life story. What would be ideal as far as the story obstacles or conclusions in that story? It actually helped the last rewrite of ‘Lab 99,’ when I thought about myself when writing about the character.

I believe there are many parallel Rujanee’s in other universes, and I’ve found those pieces here on earth, through the connections I’ve made. Whenever I meet someone that I feel immediately connect to, I feel they have been part of me at some point, or part of us – whether it is in the past, or broken into different souls or different places. But if you’re talking about the theory of a parallel world, I don’t know what she is doing. I hope one of them has lots of money, and maybe can send that to me in a dream. [laughs]

*For more information about “Lab 99” and the other works of Rujanee Mahakanjana, [click here](#). [16]*



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