



JOANNE PEH GOES BEHIND THE CAMERA

T

here's no shortage of actresses who have directed movies. Jodie Foster and Angelina Jolie come to mind, as do Greta Gerwig, Natalie Portman and Madonna.

To that list we can now add Joanne Peh, who will be making her scripting and directing debut with a 30-minute film commissioned by Toggle to be screened on Channel U.

Scriptwriting was something Joanne had always aspired to but never got a proper chance to work on. Then she heard about Mediacorp's incubator project last year – a programme offering actors a chance to try their hand at scriptwriting and directing. She didn't hesitate. She wrote a script and submitted it, not expecting her passion project to actually get picked. When it was selected, she was exhilarated.

"I was excited. I've always liked to try new things and I didn't want to waste the opportunity," she says.



OUTFIT
DIOR



Joanne Peh has given commendable performances in local dramas like *The Little Nyonya* and *A Tale of 2 Cities*. But this month, for the first time in her thespian life, she will be scripting and directing a film.

TEXT HAYLEY TAI PHOTOGRAPHY JOEL LIM/CALIBRE PICTURES & IDEAS, ASSISTED BY SHERMAN SEE-THO & SHERYL SOH STYLING MARTIN WONG
HAIR NIGEL WOO/PASSION HAIR SALON MAKEUP KENNETH LEE, USING CLE DE PEAU BEAUTE LOCATION SHANGRI-LA HOTEL





But we are getting ahead of ourselves: Joanne hasn't actually directed the film yet. So let's rewind. We are in the studio, where she has just completed a six-hour shoot for our cover. Unfazed by the long hours she's spent on set, she is still energetic. She greets me with a casual "Hi, I'm Joanne", and slips out of her heels and into comfortable sliders. The 35-year-old actress looks fresh, her makeup for our cover shoot is light, and her cheery smile is accentuated by tiny laugh lines.

"Where do you want me to sit? Is this

okay?" she asks, shifting around. She doesn't hesitate to accommodate the camera set-up, and enthusiastically engages in banter with the camera crew. It turns out Joanne is technically my senior from Nanyang Technological University, and we share dormitory memories and fuss over the school's remote location (and how the boys used to swoon over her!).

Then we discuss her film and pre-production, and I learn that Joanne wrote the script in Chinese. "It's easier for me to write in Chinese because I think in Mandarin. You're able to use certain expressions that are exclusive to Mandarin. In English, these phrases just sound awkward," she explains.

Even then, she admits that having to capture certain images, feelings and scenarios can be tough in a half-hour film. The creativity, the meticulous planning and the depth of the story have to be convincing. "You need to convey the story well because people are reading the script for the first time," she says, when asked what the most challenging part of the process was. "These people haven't been in your mind." →

OUTFIT
SALVATORE
FERRAGAMO
(BELOW)
PRADA
(FAR LEFT)

"It's easier for me to write in Chinese because I think in Mandarin. You're able to use certain expressions that are exclusive to Mandarin. In English, these phrases just sound awkward."



She based her story on real people she knows: two childhood friends who reunited after 15 years. Her cast is new to acting. The male lead, a cameraman she once worked with, was one of the inspirations for her story. "He's one way around others and another when he's on his own. I wanted to tell this story because it's interesting to see someone behave like that," she says. Wanting her actors to be natural on screen, she wrote the characters as alternative versions of the actors themselves.

She is also casting child actors in her film. Being a mother (she has two children now) has changed her view of child actors, and instead of wanting them to conform to her script, she wants her film to be a platform for them to grow. "I feel a bit bad for child actors now that I'm a mother. Children bring an innocence to the set, and I don't want them to be restricted," she says. She also draws inspiration from Pixar films and hopes to incorporate their feel-good element into her short.

Joanne is a natural at making others feel comfortable around her, and it shows: Her makeup and styling crew are always at ease. As they chat away, I feel like I'm among old friends who know one another's habits.

Joanne's relatable personality and zest for new things aren't limited to her career. Off-screen, she takes time to keep up with skincare trends and has been appointed Merz Aesthetics' latest celebrity ambassador because of the useful beauty tips she offers. She's also more *garang* than you think: She will be heading for Dubai this April for Mediacorp's travel series, *My Star Guide 14*, and has been gunning for a chance to go to Iran (an unpopular destination with guest stars of the show due to safety issues).

On set, an actor can be fazed by myriad problems, and Joanne, as an actress-turned-director, takes this very seriously. To her, being able to relate to the actors is crucial in becoming a good director. "As a director, it's important to understand what it's like to be an actor. It makes everything more comfortable for the actor."

And as a budding director, Joanne is aware that she has a lot to learn. She cites Joan Chen as a director who greatly inspires her: "If I were to become a full-time director someday, I'd hope to be like Joan Chen. She's very articulate and exudes a warm and comforting energy to the actors on set."

That day might arrive soon.

OUTFIT
VALENTINO



TAP FOR
VIDEO