



# CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEX, VIOLENCE & FAMILY VALUES

When we learnt Pam Oei, Tan Kheng Hua and Serene Chen were starring in a new film that tackles societal taboos, we couldn't pass up on the opportunity to hear their thoughts on these sticky subjects

WORDS XU CI'EN + RACHEL LIM PHOTOS ALVELYN ALKO

"My film contains intimations of child abuse, sexual violation of a teenage virgin, and a Malay girl taking part in a striptease. One of the stories has characters spewing an average of one swear word per minute. Does that answer your question?" says Ken Kwek, the director of a new short film titled *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues*. The question I had posed was if he had considered the boundaries of censorship when it came to the creation of this "no-holds-barred" film that "jettisons political correctness out the window of Singapore mainstream cinema."

We get it. This is a film that is designed to shock – but will it? Although Singapore's TV channels are stripped clean of anything vaguely prurient, we're hardly the most naïve of nations. Discussions of bared breasts and simulated sex on TV shows like *Game of Thrones* and *True Blood* continue to rule water cooler conversations, the Internet is a virtual pornography playground and despite our conservative Asian upbringing, most of us figured out how babies are made with or without the aid of formal sex education programmes. But consider our curiosity piqued anyway.

Filmed over 18 months on the premises of the Butter Factory club (the project was also the entertainment group's first foray into film), *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* comprises three comedies set in three scenarios – a kindergarten, a porn studio and a pole-dancing nightclub. The film stars Adrian Pang, Pam Oei, Tan Kheng Hua, Sonia Ratonel and Serene Chen. And together, the stories have been screened at over 10 international film festivals and one of the stories, *Porn Masala*, even went on to win the Audience Choice Award at the Gotham Screen International Film Festival in New York. In Singapore, the film was recently picked up by local distributor Cathay, which will screen the film at Orchard Cineleisure from 11 October this year.

Prior to the film's release, *August Woman* sat down with veteran actresses Pam Oei, Tan Kheng Hua and Serene Chen to find out more about their characters in the film, their attitudes towards sex and violence on and off the screen and how the latter relate to their real-life roles as working women, wives and mothers.



## PAM OEI

Most recognised as one-third of the *Dim Sum Dollies*, Oei, 40, is wife to director Ken Kwek and the mother of a 16-month-old son. She was most recently seen in *Happy Ever Laughter*, a comedy stage show she co-produced

**TELL US MORE ABOUT THE ROLE YOU PLAY IN SEX.VIOLENCE.FAMILY VALUES.** I play a heavily pregnant producer of a porno flick. My husband, played by Adrian Pang, is the director and he wants to create a porn film where a virgin is deflowered. He also casts an overweight Indian man for the role. Ken, the director, deals with racism in a very real way, more than any Singaporean filmmaker has ever done before. I think many Singaporeans are guilty of racism on a day-to-day basis and this film takes it to the extreme. Some viewers may feel uncomfortable, some may find it funny, and some may find that it rings true and think about how they treat their friends of other races. It depends on what your views are.

**HAVE YOU PLAYED RACY ROLES BEFORE?** I've played a mamasan, a prostitute and a nun who got pregnant immaculately. I've played both dramatic and comedic racy roles, but this is the first time I've played a pregnant porn producer.

**WOULD YOU EVER CONSIDER DOING NUDITY FOR A ROLE?** I've turned down roles because of nudity, but I might do it if it's a prestigious project by an esteemed director. Martin Scorsese or Woody Allen? *(laughs)* I have appeared in very little on stage like in *Animal Farm*, but that wasn't a sexual performance.

**HAS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEX CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?** I suppose when you're a teenager it's all very mysterious and you think about it all the time, especially before you actually do the act. As you gain more experience through the years, you start to really be in control of your sexual life. You discover what pleases you and what doesn't; you get more sexually comfortable with yourself.

**DO YOU THINK SINGAPOREANS TODAY ARE MORE COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING SEX THAN**

**BEFORE?** The younger generation are definitely more explicit in their discussion of sex. I just produced a show called *Happy Ever Laughter* and the two young comedians, Munah and Hirzi, express sex more vocally than any person of my generation. They put it out there on Facebook and YouTube. The younger generation have so much access to sex via the Internet, so it's a whole different ball game. I think it's a good thing, especially for teens, because their entire being is consumed by these questions and there's so much information out there. The more knowledge you have, the better.

**ON SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS, IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT MAKES AN INDIVIDUAL 'FIT' TO TEACH YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT SEX?** It's absolutely important to arm our children with knowledge on how to protect themselves, because, these days, some are sexually active as early as 11 and 12 years old. Teaching a child abstinence and only abstinence is unrealistic. To be fully equipped, the people qualified to teach sex education in schools should be people who are sexually active. It's also important that homosexuality be addressed in schools. You have to expose children to the fact that there are homosexuals in society and that there is nothing wrong with it. It will help children who are gay to accept themselves and be accepted. They shouldn't have to grow up with the stigma that there is something wrong with them, because there isn't.

**HAVE YOU EVER BEEN VIOLENT ON STAGE?** In *Mee Pok Man*, I played a mamasan who got angry with one of the girls for taking drugs, so I grabbed her hair and banged her head against the table. In *Mortal Sins*, I was kicked in the back by my mamasan. The thing about on-stage violence is that you have to think about how to make it look real and to make it safe.

**YOU'RE A NEW MUM. HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT HOW YOU'LL DISCIPLINE YOUR CHILD IN FUTURE?** I haven't got to that, but physical discipline is not something I'm adverse to, because I was caned when I was a child and, hey, I turned out fine. It was part and parcel of growing up. Of course, with kids you have to start with an explanation as to what they did wrong, but if that doesn't work and the kid continues to do something really extreme, you have to nip it in the bud – but you can't abuse.

**AS A WORKING WOMAN, WIFE AND MOTHER HOW HARD HAS IT BEEN TO JUGGLE YOUR VARIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES?** It's been really tough, I'm still juggling. But I am lucky in the sense that my husband and I are both freelancers, so we can be flexible and juggle between the both of us. The downside is that income is irregular. If I take on a project we discuss it in advance and see who can step up. But on the whole it works out to be about 50:50, but sometimes it can be 90:10. We don't have hired help, so it's a real adjustment from what we were used to.

**WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT YOU'VE LEARNT FROM YOUR PARENTS THAT YOU HOPE TO PASS DOWN TO YOUR CHILDREN?** Firstly, my parents had a great sense of humour. And they constantly laughed, which I think made them more affectionate with each other. I hope to carry that into my own marriage. Secondly, respect is sorely lacking in the younger generation today, in the way they turn up for auditions and interviews, the way interns treat the workplace and even how kids treat their maids. It's very disturbing. My parents earned our respect because of how hard they worked, because they were fair and honest people. I hope I can pass this on the next generation. Respect someone simply because he or she has done more than you and has been through more than you have.

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# SERENE CHEN

On top of acting for stage and screen, Chen, 38, is also a part-time lecturer of Theatre Arts at Republic Polytechnic. A mother of three children, she's best known for her roles in *Landmarks: Asian Boys Volume 2* and *Singapore Dreaming*



TELL US MORE ABOUT THE ROLE YOU PLAY IN *SEX.VIOLENCE.FAMILY VALUES*. I play Carol, a mum to a kid who has problems in school. I can identify with this since I have three children and I find myself often worrying over whether they fit in, but also if they just follow the herd. I guess mums worry and I thought Ken's film gave me an opportunity to express and leverage on some of these feelings.

HOW WAS IT DIFFERENT IN ANY WAY FROM PREVIOUS ROLES YOU'VE PLAYED? I got to drive in this film and I got to act with a child, which isn't easy. In Ken's film, there is extended dialogue with Matt, my on-screen child, so suffice to say it took a while to film. But Matt was absolutely great to work with and Ken has this amazing way of coaxing a performance out of kids. I was most impressed.

HAS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEX CHANGED OVER THE YEARS? There is only one word to describe me in my youth: square. Now, even that word is so passé. When I was growing up I didn't date very much, I went to an all-girls school. I was always labelled the good girl. So, I hope I have changed in the sense that I am a little less judicious over expressions of sexuality.

DID YOU GET ANNOYED BEING LABELLED THE GOOD GIRL? It definitely got to me in the subconscious level in university. But strangely, when I was in theatre, a lot of the roles I was cast in were often against my 'type'. In the very first play that I did with The Necessary Stage in 1997 called *Invincibility*, I had to straddle a guy and give him a hand job. It was staged, of course. It was quite surreal.

WAS IT UNCOMFORTABLE FOR YOU TO PLAY THAT ROLE? It was. I also had to disrobe a little.

There wasn't nudity, just underwear. There were actually two girls cast and the other actress turned it down outright because of it. I wasn't sure whether I was ready to take it on, but I guess I felt a sense of responsibility since there were only two of us who made the cut.

YOU MENTIONED YOU HAVE THREE KIDS. My oldest, Ella, is six years old. Naomi is three and the youngest is almost seven months old. I actually shot this film with Ken when I just discovered I was pregnant.

ARE YOU PERSONALLY AFRAID OF WHAT YOUR KIDS WILL BE EXPOSED TO? It's not so much sex or violence per se, it's really the Internet culture that I'm afraid of. How do we even define violence? For instance if you taunt a friend on a blog, that's already very violent, and that sort of peer pressure is enough to take you apart if you're a vulnerable teenager. The Internet helps you tremendously, but it can also really wreck your sense of reality.

VIOLENCE SEEMS TO BE THE HARDEST TOPIC TO DISCUSS BECAUSE WE'RE NOT AN OPENLY VIOLENT SOCIETY. I think in our society the violence comes out as passive aggression. If you go online, it's out there and it's reckless and irresponsible. There are people who really pick fights. But this is based on my observations and I don't want to appear to be judging them.

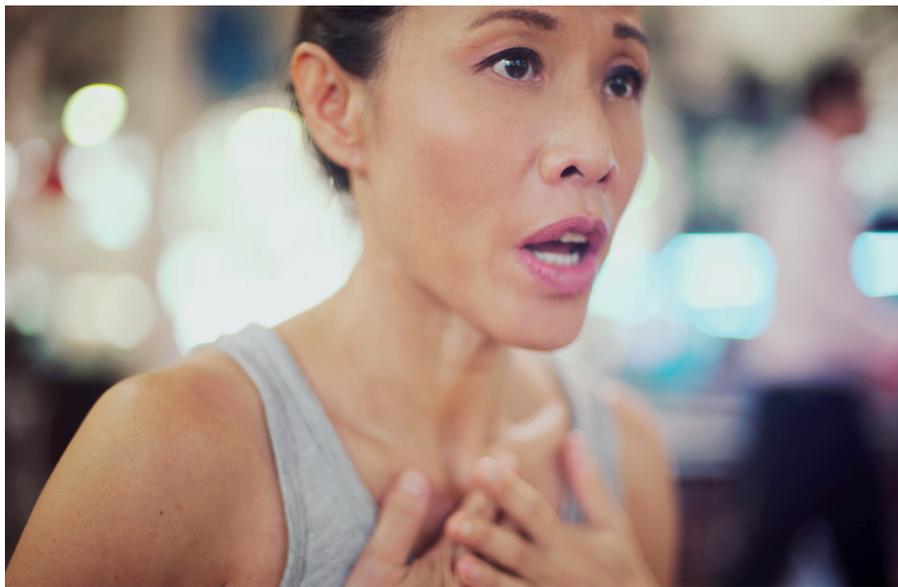
IN YOUR OPINION, HOW HAS THE LOCAL ARTS COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTED TO CREATING A DIALOGUE ABOUT SEX? I think it's hard. Dialogue through the arts should not be equivalent to a public service announcement. Any messaging is woven into the various mediums and needs to be interpreted and filtered by the audience. It will be seen through individual lenses and the resonance

will be different for everyone. That is why it's art, not propaganda nor education. That's the beauty and the liberation the arts provide. But, if the arts are governed by ratings and restrictions that ultimately hurt the ticket sales, you can imagine the painful impact on artists and arts organisations. That is a sort of practical obstacle that artists are not really able to get over.

DO YOU HAVE A CHECKLIST OF FAMILY VALUES THAT YOU WANT TO INSTIL IN YOUR CHILDREN? I do want my children to always put their family first in terms of time. Unfortunately, time is the most inelastic thing in our society. So I do hope they will prioritise family in terms of time and engagement.

DO YOU THINK THERE'S A VALID ARGUMENT BETWEEN ASIAN VALUES AND WESTERN VALUES? I don't know that the intrinsic value is different. I think that culturally it manifests itself very differently. For instance, the idea that when you're 18 years old, you get kicked out of the house in the west. But it's just the way their society is; they have to move far away for college. My American friends have told me that it hurts to hear that they have no filial piety and that they don't care about family. It's not true, they Skype their family all the time if they have to live abroad. Oddly enough, in Singapore where our distances are shorter, we often take our parents for granted.

DO YOU HAVE AN EXPECTATION THAT YOUR KIDS WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU WHEN YOU'RE OLDER? It would be great if my kids could take care of me when I'm old, but I can't expect that of them. All I wish is that my kids and I will have still have a connection, have conversations and spend quality time together. I don't want to be a burden to them, no parent ever does.



# TAN KHENG HUA

A household name in Singapore, Tan, 49, was most recently seen on stage in the critically-acclaimed *Les Cage Aux Folles*. Married to fellow thespian Lim Yu-Beng, she's also a mother to a 14-year-old daughter

TELL US ABOUT THE ROLE YOU PLAY ON *SEX, VIOLENCE AND FAMILY VALUES*. I play the Chinese wife of a Muslim man, played by Osman Sulaiman. The film is about our daughter and how she challenges certain stereotypes by going for what she wants. Sylvia Ratoniel plays our daughter, a spirited Muslim girl with a great talent and passion for pole dancing, an activity not usually associated with 'good' Muslim women.

SO IT WASN'T A DIFFICULT ROLE FOR YOU, BECAUSE YOU'VE PLAYED MOTHERS SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE. I love playing a mother onstage, onscreen and in real life. At every stage of my daughter's life, I've enjoyed something about her immensely. She makes me feel very present, very in the moment. I love being with her.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS? I believe chemistry has a lot to do with it. I have good chemistry with my kid. My daughter calms me, and when I'm with her, I like the person I am. Good chemistry cannot be bought, nor can it be nurtured. And from what I've witnessed, between parent and child, this chemistry, whether good or bad, is often apparent from the moment the child is born.

ARE THERE FAMILY VALUES THAT YOU GREW UP WITH THAT YOU WISH TO PASS ON TO YOUR DAUGHTER? I'm very close to my immediate family. My parents weren't the didactic sort. They didn't pass down family values in any hard-lined verbal manner. By not insisting on much, they showed just how much faith and trust they had in us. I guess I do pass this down to my own kid. I've always told her, "Look honey, our job is to equip you with the skills to go out there, have fun, fulfil your dreams and contribute to the world in wonderful ways. As long as we can take care of ourselves, we'd rather you not waste time taking care of us."

SO YOU'VE NEVER CONSCIOUSLY HAD A CHECKLIST OF VALUES THAT YOU FELT HAD TO BE IMPARTED? I tend to be pretty reactionary as a parent. I like to observe before I act. And very often, I believe in non-intervention as the best way to teach. I think too many parents spend too much time giving instructions. I prefer to have a chat. Sometimes, it might be wise to stop parenting your kids. Just be with them, be interested and have fun. You're telling them in the best way that they're not alone. That's an important message.

HAVE YOU ACTIVELY TAUGHT YOUR DAUGHTER SEX EDUCATION? I haven't sat down with diagrams or explicitly explained things. We had a few timely chats after watching some 'sensitive' scenes from movies or TV. Let's put it this way, she probably knows everything already and for some time now. My god, kids nowadays.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION IS VASTLY DIFFERENT FROM YOUR GENERATION WHEN IT COMES TO SEX. I fully agree. My formative adult life was a time of no high-tech communication. Before pagers even. We waited for phone calls. We wrote love letters. My daughter's world is nowhere like mine. I don't have to accept everything about her digitally enhanced world, but fighting this world is not the way to go. I do my homework, and know enough to find her in the flurry of fonts, Facebook, flickr and whatever else.

DOES IT SCARE YOU KNOWING WHAT SHE COULD BE EXPOSED TO? Equipment doesn't scare me. People scare me. My daughter doesn't give me a reason to be afraid, yet, so I'm not scared. I don't worry about technology. I worry about the people around the kid using the technology. Make sure the kid trusts you the most, and be someone they can and want to turn to and you'll be fine.

THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF DEBATE RECENTLY ABOUT SEX EDUCATION. When my daughter was 12 years old, she gave me a consent form to sign from school. It was for an anti-abortion talk. I looked at the form and before doing anything, I told her, "Honey, you can go for the talk if you want, but remember this - no one can control your body but you. Nobody can tell you what's right or what's wrong. I'm not telling you to go out there and be promiscuous and work things out the hard way. I am saying, this is your life, you make the choices you think are right and you will have to live with these choices." She went for the talk. And as for how she'll handle things in the future, well, we'll have to wait and see, won't we?

HAVE YOU EVER DONE NUDITY IN YOUR WORK? Yes, but not explicitly. I was in the stage production of *The Blue Room* and there was a scene I shared with Robin Leong where he undoes my dress. I had nipple tape on my boobs, but only he got to see them, not the audience. I'm not very self-conscious about my body. It's important that the context for the nudity is right, and that the people around you treat you with respect. There's a place for sensuality and sexuality in our lives. It's a very powerful sort of energy.

HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED A VIOLENT SCENE THAT MADE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE? Yes, the latest ones are from the Korean movie, *The Chaser*. I nearly died. I'm a real scaredy-cat when it comes to watching scary scenes in movies.

DO YOU THINK KIDS CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL AND IMAGINARY VIOLENCE? I'm quite sure they can, although our kids' notions of violence have changed. In my daughter's vocabulary are words like "terrorists", "mass shootings", "bombings". It wasn't like that when I was 14.

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