

F O L I O

## Theatrical Chiaroscuro

In 1970, the British theatrical photographer Angus McBean (1904-90) sold Harvard his oeuvre: a collection of 40,000 glass-plate negatives, weighing eight tons, that has become the most-requested archive of visual material in the Harvard Theatre Collection (part of Houghton Library). McBean (pronounced *McBain*)



worked through the glory years of British theater from the 1930s to the 1960s; his career encompasses the early work of Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, and Alec Guinness, as well as the next generation of stars, like Richard Burton, Audrey Hepburn, and Elizabeth Taylor. McBean shot Mae West and Noel Coward as well as *West Side Story* and the cover of the Beatles' first album, *Please Please Me* (1963).

*The Theatrical World of Angus McBean* (David R. Godine, 2009), by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson, curator of the Theatre Collection, is a handsome volume bringing together some of the photographer's memorable images, all in black-and-white. (McBean, who was skillful at retouching his portraits, avoided color because it was far more difficult to alter.) He was "in nearly every sense a conservative," Wilson writes in his introduction, noting that "in a photographic age that came to embrace the strobe light, the light meter, and the hand-held, small-format film camera, he employed cumbersome floodlights and a view camera that relied upon six-by-four inch glass plates [which Kodak stopped manufacturing during McBean's lifetime]. He gauged his exposures by eye." Yet those large glass plates could



McBean's favorite model—and muse—was Vivien Leigh (1913-1967), here photographed for a 1951 production of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. (At left) Bruce Ingram, publisher of the *Illustrated London News*, posed in 1950 with bound volumes of every edition of the paper since 1842.

capture 30 times the detail of a 35-millimeter negative. As opera scholar Richard Traubner writes in an introductory essay, they recorded "the fabulously dark blacks, Velázquez-like in their density, and the dramatic chiaroscuro effects that were McBean's hallmarks." The result is a book bursting with visual drama. ~C.L.

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## Indie Film Blues

*The skinny on ciné*

by KEVIN HARTNETT

**M**YNETTE LOUIE '07 is an independent film producer based in New York City. Since beginning her career with a post-college weekend stint as a production assistant, she has co-produced Andrew Bujalski's critically acclaimed *Mutual Appreciation* (2004) and produced several narrative short films by minority women directors. Her most recent feature film, *Children of Invention* ([www.childrenofinvention.com](http://www.childrenofinvention.com)), about two Chinese-American children left to fend for themselves after their mother is arrested, premiered at the 2009 Sundance

Film Festival and has won Grand Jury Prizes at festivals from Newport to Los Angeles. Despite that success, the movie has struggled to find an audience or turn a profit in an uncertain time for the independent film world.

*KH: Explain what's so challenging for independent filmmakers about the current environment.*

*ML: The do-it-yourself movement has revolutionized filmmaking and made it really cheap for people to make movies. Everybody's doing it now. There's a glut*



Producer Mynette Louie on the set of her film *Children of Invention*

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Louie and director Tze Chun check a monitor during production.

of content, so it's a buyer's market for distributors.

A lot of movies are not getting distribution—and if you can't get distribution, it's really hard to make back your budget and recoup your investors' money. So investors are now pulling back because they realize there are a lot of films sitting on people's shelves.

Films were getting bought out of Sundance for lots of money above their production budgets. People were getting rich off of indie film. There was a hedge fund craze, where all these funds were putting up production financing. As a result I think indie films started turning into basi-

A production still from *Children of Invention*, with Crystal Chiu as Tina and Michael Chen as Raymond



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cally low-rent studio films. They adopted the same formulas and they were not that interesting.

*KH: You've been selling DVDs of the film at festivals and on your website—an unusual step for a film that has not been distributed yet. What went into that decision?*

*ML: Going into Sundance, our expectations were realistic. We understood that distributors don't know what to do with a movie with no stars and Asian-American actors. We consulted with our executive producer,*

*Dan Cogan [91] of Impact Partners. It was his idea to start selling DVDs on the festival circuit. We were very hesitant about it. In previous years, if you did this, you were tainting your film. Selling DVDs prior to a theatrical release was basically an admission that you couldn't find a distribution deal. We've done quite well selling the film to audiences at our festival screenings, and actually doubled the advances that any of my friends have been offered for a film. It's still going to take a couple years to break even.*

*KH: Day-and-date distribution, in which a film is simultaneously released in the theater and on DVD, is generating a lot of interest. What do you think of it?*



Visit [harvardmag.com/extras](http://harvardmag.com/extras) to view a film clip from "Children of Invention"



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ML: I think it's brilliant. The challenge is theater owners who are very old-school. They really believe you do theatrical first, a few months later you do DVD, a few months later you do video-on-demand [VOD], and then TV.

But I totally believe in collapsing all of those. It makes sense because studios don't make any money selling tickets at the theater. People have acknowledged that theatrical releases are really just for marketing, and to get that *New York Times* review. It's a marketing expense to play in a theater, so if you have a DVD and VOD in place, when that *Times* review hits, you have a lot of people reading that review, saying I want to see that, and I can buy it right now.

KH: New delivery methods have disrupted content production in every type of media. How have they affected independent film?

ML: With TiVo, VOD, iPhones, et cetera, as well as a glut of content, audiences are much more fragmented and people have shorter attention spans. I think because of

**“Theatrical releases are really just for marketing and to get that *New York Times* review. It's a marketing expense to play in a theater.”**

that there's been a resurgence in short-form and episodic content. You are seeing a lot of film people migrate to TV. Martin Scorsese, in fact, has a new HBO series [*Boardwalk Empire*, scheduled for broadcast this year].

It's because there is more money that can be made developing episodic dramas. [In] the episodic series you can have your short, contained episodes for easy consumability, and you can build character and story, too—over a series of episodes. Everyone is saying that TV is where the best drama is happening today, and I agree.

KH: A longtime indie film executive recently said there's a silver lining to the fragmentation of media,

and it's that because buzz—good or bad—spreads so rapidly, there's a growing demand for quality films. Is that something you've noticed?

ML: People thought *Snakes on a Plane*, for example, was going to make so much money. But then when people actually saw it and saw how bad it was, they blogged about it and it didn't end up doing as well as they expected. Word spreads like wildfire now, on the Internet and everywhere else, so if something does

suck, you're probably going to be dead in the water. I don't know that the appetite for good content is different. I just think that people kill bad content.

Kevin Hartnett '03 is a freelance writer in Philadelphia. *Children of Invention* opened in Boston for a “hometown run” on February 26 at the Brattle Theatre. It debuts simultaneously on March 12 in New York City (as part of a double bill at BIG Cinemas Manhattan) and in Los Angeles (at the Downtown Independent).

## An Ageless Voice on Aging

*Shakespeare on time's passage—and potency*

by ADAM KIRSCH

**I**N THE TEEMING UNIVERSE of Shakespeare's plays, you can find people of any and every age. There are young children like Mamillius, the king's son in *The Winter's Tale*; teenage lovers like Romeo and Juliet; and men in their prime, like Henry V.

But as Maurice Charney, Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers and past president of the Shakespeare Association of America, reminds us in *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare*, a surprising number of the plays' most powerful characters are very old. There is King Lear, of course,

“fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less,” who at the beginning of his play announces his intention to “unburdened crawl toward death,” and by the end seems cosmically ancient: “The oldest hath borne most; we that are young/Shall never see so much, nor live so long,” Edgar predicts. There is Falstaff, the fat old knight, who keeps flirting and boasting despite his gray hair: “Have you not



**Orson Welles produced, directed, and starred in the 1952 *Othello*—a tale of jealous and declining potency.**

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