

Tv Close-Up: Lucy Liu

by Eirik_Knutzen

"Tenacious" doesn't quite describe Lucy Liu's entire persona, but it's a start. An example of her entire makeup - including guts, determination and patience - is her singular focus on executive producing and playing the female lead in yet another remake of the "Charlie Chan" movie series.

LUCY LIU - Lucy Liu stars in the new comedy/drama series 'Cashmere Mafia.' CNS Photo courtesy of ABC. The "Charlie Chan" project - which could be very big, very small or nonexistent sometime in the near future - came across Liu's transom in 2000. So far, no shooting script has received a green light from the studio powers-that-be at Twentieth Century Fox. There is no leading man, much less No. 2 Son.

"When we have a very strong script, everything from that point on will fall into place," said Liu, with utmost confidence. "I've been working on it for seven years and Fox has been really, really supportive."

If it becomes reality, her film will be the 48th movie vehicle loosely based on the Chinese-American character created by Earl Derr Biggers in his 1925 novel "House Without a Key."

Modeled after a genuine Chinese-American detective (Chong Apana) in Honolulu, Chan was played by George Kuwa in the 1926 feature film-version of "House Without a Key" - the first of many Charlies portrayed mostly by Warner Oland, Sidney Toler and Roland Winters (none of them with even remote Asian roots). For good measure, non-Chinese J. Carrol Naish portrayed the inscrutable lawman in 39 TV episodes of "The New Adventures of Charlie Chan" (1957-58).

But the positive side of "Charlie Chan's" snail's pace is that it has left the delicate (reportedly about 5-foot-2 and barely tipping the scales at 100 pounds), 39-year-old Chinese-American with ample time for other projects both as an actress and a producer - particularly since her comedy-action flicks "Charlie's Angels" (2000) and "Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle" (2003) did boffo box office worldwide.

Before even reporting for work in her hometown of New York City on her new comedy/drama series "Cashmere Mafia" (executive produced by "Sex and the City's" Darren Star and previewing 10 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 6; premiere, Wednesday Jan. 9 ABC), Liu knocked out the indie flick "Rockett," the action-comedy "Code Name: The Cleaner," voiced a snake in the animated film "Kung Fu Panda," played an undead reporter in the supernatural thriller "Rise" and had a heck of a good time in the offbeat romantic comedy "Watching the Detective."

There are several other film and TV scripts on her desk, but "Cashmere Mafia" is her current drug of choice. "This series is an amazing opportunity for me to start a series from scratch," said the slight, but hard-bodied actress who practices the martial art of kali-eskrima-silat off-camera. "'Ally McBeal'" (she received an Emmy Award nomination for her recurring role of Ling Woo during the 1998-2002 seasons) was a wonderful shot at television, but it was already a successful show.

"On 'Cashmere Mafia,' I'm creating a character from the ground up in a partnership with the creator, producers, writers, directors and other actors," explained Liu, who has top billing in the show as one of four driven, high-powered businesswomen who want it all. And protect each other's back in a man's world. She portrays Mia Mason, a publishing phenomenon not above competing with her fiance for a promotion and a pay raise, his ethics and buff body be damned.

Frances O'Conner plays Zoe Burden, a cutthroat investment banker with (apparently) a loving architect husband and two rambunctious kids; Miranda Otto is Juliet Draper, the chief operating officer of a major hotel chain with a philandering husband and Bonnie Somerville (Caitlin Dowd) portrays a cosmetics firm marketing executive still working on the little things in her life, including her sexual orientation.

"I love 'Cashmere Mafia's' concept and characters, but I must admit that coming back to New York, where I was born and raised (in Queens), also had something to do with it," Liu admitted. "I needed time away from L.A. and more time with my family - I was away too long from my parents, a brother and a sister."

Liu - a bright and articulate individual with a wicked sense of humor - learned her solid work ethic from her Shanghai immigrant parents, a businessman and a biochemist. A to student, she graduated from NYC's Stuyvesant High School and enrolled at NYU for a year, then transferred to the University of Michigan. Before earning a 1989 Bachelor of Science degree in Asian languages and cultures, Liu - who now travels to

politically unstable regions for various UNICEF children's programs - stumbled into acting via a campus production of "Alice in Wonderland." "And that was it," she recalled, laughing. "I'm possibly the black sheep of the family who realized that the time to pursue acting as now."

Success came very traditionally by Hollywood standards: Tiny parts on such series as "The X-Files" and "Hercules" followed by a mixed bag of motion pictures, including "Payback" (1999), "Kill Bill" (2003) and "Lucky Number Slevin" (2006). And perhaps it came at a price - too little time for personal relationships or marriage.

"I'm seeing a mystery person now who will remain a mystery person," said Liu, disengaged from writer Zach Helm two years ago. "I'd rather not get into that."

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