

From swinging swords to winning awards, how North York's hardest working star conquered Hollywood

BY SAM TOMAN

MIRANDA KWOK KICKS butt.

She began her legacy as the 5' 1," 100 pound MVP of her high school rugby team. She followed it up as a fearless Hollywood stunt woman and martial artist. Now, she is gearing up to continue the trend on the big screen with no less than six films slated for release this year.

You may not recognize her name yet, but her face should be familiar, as Kwok might just be the hardest working Canadian in Hollywood.

She's had feature roles on top-rated shows like *ER*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *7th Heaven*, and she's starred in countless independent pictures. But it's her new project — a groundbreaking film based on her award-winning script — that has her primed for recognition.

"The project is called *Song of Silence*," Kwok says over the phone from a film shoot in New Jersey. "It's about the comfort women. During World War II, the Japanese military abducted 200,000 women and forced them into sexual slavery to serve their troops. It was a story that was buried for 50 years." Kwok stumbled upon the story several years ago while she was splitting her time as an actor and a counsellor at a sexual assault crisis line.

"The first time I heard about it was at the Toronto Metropolitan Library," she says. "They actually had a memorial with photographs of these women who had been taken and used for several years."

The images she saw stayed with her, and she began assembling the screenplay. In 2004 she submitted the completed script to the Slamdance film festival. "I only entered because they said that they would give some feedback to all of the entries," she says.

Kwok received the kind of feedback every author dreams of. Of the 3,000 entries, hers was selected as the winner, and a live reading of the script was performed with *ER* alums Linda Cardellini and Noah Wyle (who almost missed an appearance on *Oprah* for a chance to do the reading).

It was just the break Kwok needed.

The exposure generated the requisite buzz needed to get a heady project like hers off the ground.

"The movie was just optioned, and I have a really great director attached," Kwok explains. "It's Jonathan Kaplan. He directed *The Accused*, where Jodie Foster won her first Oscar. And he also did *Lovefield*, where Michelle Pfeiffer was nominated for an Oscar as well"

However, as the project goes through all of the necessary steps before it actually becomes a film, Kwok has to keep occupied. This means doing what she does best: kicking butt.

The year 2008 will probably be the busiest year for the actor. She'll star in six films, including *Bare Knuckles* ("It's *Fight Club* for women"), *iMurders* ("Charles Durning plays my shrink, and I try to kill Billy D. Williams, who played Lando Calrissian in *Star Wars*") and *Richard III* where she also served as a unit production manager.

The heavy workload might seem like a curse to some, but the world of a working Hollywood actor is a crowded one, and it's one that chews up hopeful young talent and spits them back to their far-off hometowns.

However, for eight years now, Kwok has done the chewing, making the most of her opportunities by taking on challenging roles and turning them into inspired performances.

Becoming an actor wasn't always Kwok's goal. In fact she kind of stumbled into it while attending Claude Watson School for the Arts at Earl Haig Secondary School.

"I actually went there for visual arts, but I didn't realize the audition was for everything," she says. "I still have nightmares about that audition."

The folks at the audition must have seen her natural talent because she was accepted with zero prior experience and enrolled the following year.

Kwok's time at Earl Haig proved to be crucial to her development as an artist.

"Most of my friends were drama majors, and even though I was a visual artist, after watching them, I realized that's what I wanted to do," she says. "I

had my television debut when I was 13, on a kid video show called *Kid Vidz*. I had an agent when I was 16."

Kwok admits her career choice wasn't always an easy one for her parents, who still live in the North York home she grew up in.

"My family is Chinese, and they were never really into the arts. Their thing was to go to school, get a good education and become a doctor or a lawyer."

For a while, that's what she thought she'd do. After high school, Kwok, shelved her acting career and studied to become a psychiatrist.

However the lure a career in the arts was just too much to ignore, and Kwok re-entered the world of acting.

To get an advantage over her countless starving peers, she's harnessed the determination she learned growing up in North York.

"The thing I love about North York is how diverse it is, it opens your eyes," she says. "Growing up, I never wanted to be a stereotype."

This defiant spirit explains how the diminutive Kwok became the motorcycle-riding captain for her high school rugby team.

"I grew up with an older brother, and even though I'm very petite, I've always been a tough guy," she says. "I played rugby in high school. At Earl Haig, I got the MVP award the first year I played. The following year I was the captain of the team. I was the scrum half."

"Fearless," might be another apt description for the actor. John Panjer, curriculum leader at Claude Watson, remember Kwok's rugby prowess but also her daring mode of transportation.

"The thing I remember about Miranda is that she would always show up at school riding her motorcycle," says Panjer.

It's an image Kwok finds hilarious.

"It was a 1988 Yamaha. It was my first bike," she says. "Again, it comes from having an older brother. He actually had a motorcycle first. I never wanted to ride on the back. I wanted my own."

But when she did get one, her folks weren't too thrilled.

"When my parents found out I bought it, they offered to pay me to return it."

Of course she didn't and even shipped the bike to L.A. when she moved there. And in a way it came in handy as she cultivated her career far from home. Apparently motorcycle-riding, scriptwriting martial artists aren't easy to find in California.

"I do a little bit of stunt work, and I do a lot of my own stunts. It one of those things ... I was an actor first," she says. "But out here you get stigmatized as being a stunt woman and not a real actor, so I just thought, 'That's a bunch of crap. The more you have to offer the more work you're going to get. If there is a job, and it's between me and someone who doesn't do anything else I have the edge because they don't have to hire a stunt person.'"

At the suggestion that this attitude might be bad for her health, she doesn't flinch.

"It's dangerous sometimes, but everything is dangerous."

Kwok also practises whushu, a northern Chinese martial art made famous by action star Jet Li, and it's just one of the many talents — which according to her CV include scuba diving, weightlifting, piano, kick-boxing and firearms — that have all kept her with steady work.

Kwok won't need any of these skills for *Song of Silence*. She doesn't plan on acting in the film, instead focusing on the production side.

"It's not about just being an actor to be famous, it's because I'm a storyteller at heart," she says. "That's why I started writing and producing. Plus, when you're an actor, you're always waiting around for the phone to ring. But I'm just not that person to sit around and wait for something to happen."

"That's the tough thing. Nobody sees a project like [*Song of Silence*] and says, 'Hey this is going to make us a lot of money,'" she says. "The people who do, do it because they know it's a story that needs to be told."

MIRANDA KWOK

// I grew up with an older brother, and even though I'm very petite, I've always been a tough guy. //

