Near-naked sushi servers a little too raw for chef

JOANNA SMITH
STAFF REPORTER

A downtown Asian restaurant's female executive chef worries the owner's decision to serve sushi atop almost-naked models to spice up its menu for film fest crowds will damage its reputation.

"It's selling sex, I think," Monsoon Restaurant's chef Windal Wong said. "I just think we're better than that."

Clothed only in bikini swimwear and banana leaves, a male and female model will lie on the bar like a sexy garnish and have patrons eat sushi off their bodies for a couple of hours several nights during the Toronto International Film Festival.

"The traditional concept is they are actually naked," the restaurant's owner, Patrick Mallon, said of *nyotaimori*, which is what "naked sushi" is called in Japanese. "We're not quite that risqué."

Mallon said he first heard of the gimmick from somebody who was serving it in California and Florida. He thought it would be a fun idea to try it at Monsoon, albeit with some clothing and a second gender thrown into the mix.

"We don't want to offend anybody," he said, adding that the professional models he hired for the job have said it will be an interesting addition to their portfolios.

But his decision did end up offending his executive chef, one of only a few women to reach that position in Toronto's high-end culinary world.

"Food on bodies? I just don't think that's right, period," Wong said from home, where she is on maternity leave.

"We've worked so hard to revive this restaurant," Wong said of her staff in the kitchen, which includes her sous-chef husband Sam Chao.

"I just think in the end it'll hurt business."

Wong took over Monsoon's kitchen in 2002 when the restaurant was already seven years old.

Her innovative and modern take on Asian cuisine helped to raise it from its lagging reputation to high-end hot spot, earning it excellent reviews along the way.

"She was a little concerned that we weren't going to be able to do it with taste, given the status of the restaurant," Mallon said.

Wong said Mallon is the owner and so she respects his decision, but told him she did not want anything to do with it.

Social worker Brian Henry's efforts to help young people cope with the pressures he grew up is at the centre of timely documentary by veteran filmmaker Allan King.

Toronto's troubled youth in focus

REVIEW

Seen through eyes of social worker

Documentary has no easy answers

GEOFF PEVERE
MOVIE CRITIC

"You can say what you will about Allan King's 50 years in the non-fiction movie-making business — it began with *Skid Row* in 1956 — but you can't say he likes doing things the easy way.

On the contrary, his last two films — *Dying at Grace* and *Memory for Max, Claire, Ida and Company* — have taken on subjects, like death and Alzheimer's respectively, that are not only difficult, they're about phenomena the camera can't penetrate.

It can only observe, but observation in King's hands is nothing short of an art. Few filmmakers can probe beneath the surface with quite the same cool eloquence as Allan King.

With his new film, *EMPz 4 Life* (the title refers to graffiti spotted on a brick wall in the neighbourhood where the movie was made), King is once again drawn to individuals beyond reach — of the camera, of their families and of institutional society itself.

In this case, the subject is young black kids living in projects in Toronto, and from the very first minutes what strikes you is just how remote they are. These are kids for whom the wearing of figurative masks — accessorized by hoods, hats and sunglasses — has become a way of going into the world without letting it in. They're rarely seen looking anyone in the eye, and they take their attitude of tough guy stoniness as a matter of pride. And, given their economic and social circumstances, of survival.

The kind of kids usually described as "high risk," these teenagers are really just the backdrop against which *EMPz 4 Life* plays out its often wrenchingly intense drama.

The real subject is Brian Henry, a young volunteer social worker who daily flaunts the impossible: He makes it his job not only to try and reach these kids, but to get them to think about the future they've already more or less given up on. A native of the neighbourhood in which he works, Henry is also a black man with a criminal record and an all-too-vivid understanding of the stakes.

Using his customary technique of verité-style observation, which involves no narration or direct interviews, King's crew follows Henry around as he heroically rounds the kids up and delivers them to the schools which most of them have already drifted away from.

And the odds are stacked staggeringly against Henry's favour. Some of the kids have already flirted with violence, crime and drugs, and many of the institutions ostensibly there to help matters — like the police, the schools and social agencies — seem perversely determined to keep the kids locked within the very patterns which doom them to failure, despair and marginalization.

But while Henry's efforts are heroic, the man himself is all too poignantly human. Faced daily with kids who drift back into the streets, official institutions that suspect his motives, and the cops who prowl the neighbourhood streets constantly, the man appears frequently to be on the verge of doing exactly what he's attempting to convince his reluctant charges not to: to surrender to futility.

Like all of King's best movies (*Warrendale*, *A Married Couple*, *Dying at Grace*), *EMPz 4 Life* offers no easy solutions to the problem it describes. It's too honest for that, and too respectful of the situation faced by the people it observes.

But god knows there's merit in allowing a problem its complexity and depth, and there's even something strangely hopeful about simply taking the time to do what most media coverage of troubled inner city kids in Toronto apparently can't and perhaps won't do, which is take the time for a good, long, unblinking and penetrating look.

This is exactly what *EMPz 4 Life* does, and it's exactly why Allan King, at 75, remains one of this country's most vital and important documentarians.

EMPz 4 Life screens today at 11.45 a.m. and Monday at 5.45 p.m. at the Varsity.

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