# WITHERED BLOSSOMS

DP T. OXFORD  DIR. LIONEL SEAH

a film about what is felt though unacknowledged; things more deeply conveyed with a pause in conversation than the words that bracket silence.



*Enjoying Cannes - Stella Ye (actor), Lionel Seah (director), Jordan Taylor (production designer), T. Oxford (cinematographer), Miki Clarke (producer), Franziska Sahr (continuity), Jack Needle (editor) - PHOTO Dibosh Rayhan Rafique*

Withered Blossoms was shot as a passion project between the first and second year of the AFTRS Master program, when writer/director Lionel Seah teamed up with cinematographer Tim Oxford.

Nearing the end of their first year, International AFTRS Student Lionel Seah approached fellow AFTRS Master of Arts Student Tim Oxford with a project he'd written and wanted Oxford to shoot over their summer break. "He shared photos he captured of 1950s apartment buildings he'd noticed in our adjoining neighbourhoods, the type made with dark bricks over two to three floors, with large windows looking out to the street." Oxford admits he was immediately interested and knew from Seah's previous film, Holding On Letting Go (2020) which screened at international film festivals in Singapore and Brussels, the importance location specificity played in Seah's filmmaking style. "I began to sense his year in Australia had been percolating in the back of his mind as he considered how to integrate his mise-en-scène with our urban landscape." The film follows a single pivotal day between a grandmother (Rachel Young) and a granddaughter (Stella Ye) as they negotiate the thwarted ambitions and hopes for each other's lives.

Production occurred principally in a cozy one bedroom Coogee apartment, across four days in January. Producer Miki Clarke providing the all-important location the director was after to capture his intricate vision. "My wife and I happily opened our apartment as the main location for our creative team," says Clarke, adding, "Our director, Lionel, transformed our humble abode and its surroundings into a poignant interplay of time, light, and space."

With unique contours and levels, the art deco house was crucial to the film's visual climax. "They danced together, grounding the poetry of our film without venturing into the esoteric. Of course, squeezing twelve people and an unloaded grip van into 35 square meters turned our cozy home into a veritable hothouse, but the results were well worth it."

Oxford believes the primary collaboration between director and cinematographer is with the framing and blocking of each scene, almost all of which, in Withered Blossoms are covered in single stationary shots. "Operating as a director who has roots in the New Asian Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s and holding a deep love of the work of Edward Yang, Lionel opts for frames with layers, rarely with a single plane and almost always with doorways and other elements at the



*Scene from Withered Blossoms*

edges." Oxford explains, "we're often away from the protagonists and always at eye level, the camera coolly regarding them."

Jordan Taylor, the film's production designer reveals, "we focused on quite pared back but cohesive visuals with soft colour palettes and textures." With such a beautiful script and quiet story, Taylor wanted to emphasise that in the design. "We wanted to play on the withered flower motif without being overt and I think we accomplished that with the fresh peonies next to the dying ones in the vase accompanied by photos of her past."

Collaborating between DP and director was always with a large degree of trust, "When working with Lionel, I know two things: one, he tends to know what he wants; and two, he will always consider an idea that you offer him. I can tell this because he'll close his eyes and rub his chin while he considers it. It's hard to be disappointed with a director when you can watch them literally think about the ideas you bring to the table, even if some go by the wayside," says, Oxford.

Sydney has lately played itself in films such as in Anyone But You DP Danny Ruhlmann ACS, The Fall Guy DP Jonathan Sela ASC or passed as an anonymous fictional metropole in films such as, The Matrix Bill Pope ASC and Superman Returns DP Newton Thomas Sigel ASC. "For a large city, it often feels like an overgrown small town and this is the version of the emerald city less seen on screen, shuffling through the slow summer days of January, when it seems like half the population is yet to return from vacation." Capitalising on an opportunity to show Sydney a little differently, especially given their largely foreign-to-Sydney-or-even-Australia cast and crew—with diversity comes unique perspectives. Oxford notes, "the majority of the dialogue is in Cantonese and our ten person cast and crew hail from a variety of international and interstate locations … One of my main goals as cinematographer was to evoke the sensation of Sydney in a film that features none of the obvious landmarks or clues."

The camera team consisted of Skye Netting (BA Year 2) as 1AC, Tom Xiao (BA Year 3) as 2AC, and Sebastian Reatagui handling data and show LUT in pre and working as colourist in post. Filmed on Blackmagic URSA Mini Pro 4.6K G1, with thanks to Jamie Gray for the camera loan, in 3:1 compressed RAW paired with Oxford's personal set of Leica-R lenses. "Most scenes play out in single master shots and the Leica Elmarit 28mm was the main lens for the project, always paired with



*Withered Blossoms Selection Poster*

Tiffen Glimmerglass ¼." For consistent perspective almost everything was f2.8. To create a look, feel and sense of being close to the coast, with a feeling of salt in the air, Oxford used a show LUT to accentuate the blues, which were tweaked in the final grade to convey and capitalise on those blues. "Just like the meme, at a recent Sydney screening an audience member in front of me remarked, 'that's Sydney' during a scene set at a harbourside park, despite the harbour backdrop being far in the shallow focus of a shot on a 90mm lens. I knew we had found the right sensation then."

The film was selected for La Cinéfondation, the student program of the Cannes Film Festival, which came, "as beyond a surprise; Lionel and Miki had built our schedule around the entry deadline but having no concept at that point of what "La Cinef" was, I had no idea that it involved Cannes and figured it was something else interesting. That was an understatement."

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Attending La Cinéfondation allowed the team to meet many of the other student filmmakers in the program, as well as being able to watch their shorts across four separate programs. "Comparing notes on our studies, experiences, and local industries." Along with the student films they were treated with the opportunity to attend a number of screenings including premieres of Furiosa and Megalopolis in the Grand Lumiere Theatre. "My personal highlight was finishing a screening of David Cronenberg's "The Shrouds" —don't believe the bad reviews—the film is great, only for our sound designer Kevin Chan to tell me both how much he had loved it and that it was his first Cronenberg film. A proud cinemagoing moment for me."

La Cinéfondation top honours, the Premier Prix awarded to Sunflowers Were The First Ones To Know Dir. Chidananda S. Naik, DP Suraj Thakur; FTII, India. Deuxième Prix prize shared between joint winners, Out The Window Through The Wall Dir. Asya Segalovich, DP Nikita Sysoyev; Columbia University, USA and The Chaos She Left Behind Dir. Nikos Kolioukos, DP Alexandra Riba; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. While the Troisième Prix present to Bunnyhood Dir. Mansi Maheshwari, DP Adam Pietkiewicz; NFTS, United Kingdom.

Oxford was thrilled when Withered Blossoms recently played Sydney Film Festival, "it did so alongside the film's 2AC Tom Xiao own film as DP on "The Last Reel In Front Of You" (2023), profiling iconic projectionist Alan Butterfield, making it a family affair." Withered Blossoms has also screened at Melbourne International Film Festival, and most recently at CineFest Oz in Western Australia, with a forthcoming appearance at Festival des Antipodes in Saint-Tropez in October.