

INTERVIEW

What are hate crimes, and where does the focused energy come from that allows individuals to commit them? Film director Arthur Dong, who has been making documentaries for most of his professional life, is using his latest film, *Licensed to Kill*, as a way to try to answer some of the profundities in these difficult questions. *Licensed to Kill* deals with crimes of murder, specifically murders stemming from rage directed toward gay men.

Cinema

A native of San Francisco, Dong, 43, is the first-generation son of Chinese-born, low-wage earning workers. In his film he has created a chilling, valuable and insightful examination of seven crimes of murder and passion. Dong went into the current lairs of these killers—state and federal prisons—and interviewed hate-filled men with the pulsating need to do damage to homosexuals.

Dong, a highly attractive, slender man on the shortish side, has been documenting his Asian and gay backgrounds since high school, when he created a five-minute super-8 project on the dancing lion in a Chinatown celebration. His working-class background included a father who toiled as a waiter and a mother whose garment-worker career Dong profiled in the Oscar-nominated short documentary *Sewing Woman* (1982); parents who imbued him with a need to succeed. Previous documentaries include *OutRage '69* (broadcast on PBS), *Coming Out Under Fire* (based on Allan Bérubé's book and shown on PBS), *Forbidden City, USA* (for PBS), and 10 short documentaries for KCET-Los Angeles' *Life & Times* show. Dong has won grants from the Rockefeller Film and Video Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts and other supporting foundations. He has also been nominated for three local and one national Emmy Awards, as well as the highly coveted Oscar.

Licensed to Kill took a year to make. For the final cut, Dong included interviews with seven inmates (out of 15 interviewed) who are incarcerated in Texas, New York, Illinois, North Carolina, Minnesota and Arkansas. All were convicted of first- or second-degree murder, and none will likely ever be released. It's always terrifying to see the degree of hatred necessary to kill, but all of the men interviewed directly or indirectly cite this culture's casual hatred of homosexuals as part of their background to murder. Even the one out-gay killer understands the degree of self-hatred that his father's religious instruction instilled in him. The men, five white and two black, show little remorse, except perhaps for having been caught. That is the most chilling aspect of the documentary.

CONVERSATIONS WITH KILLERS

Filmmaker Arthur Dong probes seven murderers of gay men for the reasons why

by Dale Reynolds

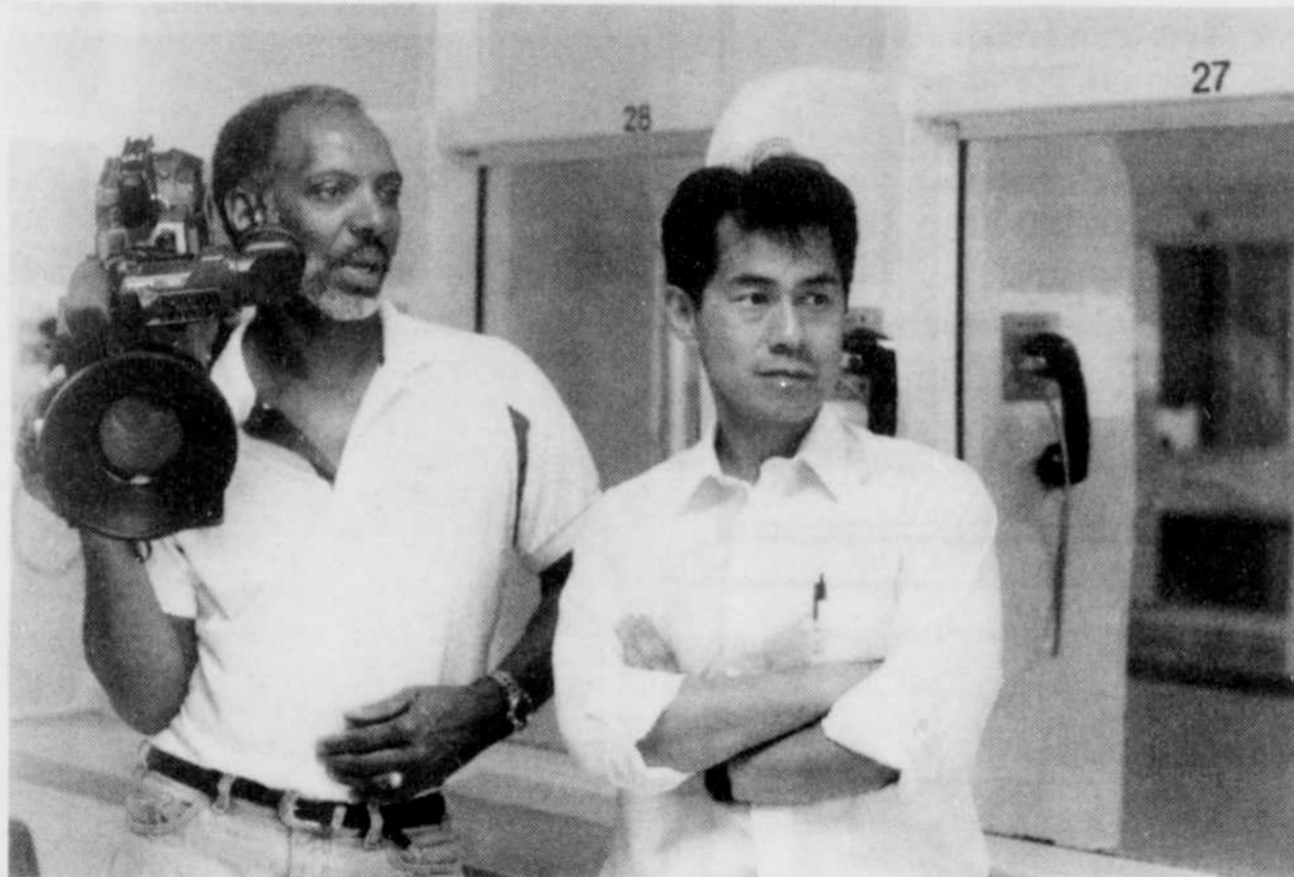
Licensed to Kill is no dry sociological treatise on its frightening subject—killers taking turns justifying their acts—which creates much of the film's tension. Dong remains convinced that the killers reflect all too accurately the hatred and misunderstanding within the heart of this country.

"Nothing's changed in terms of basic progress," he says. "Yes, we have more and more people speaking out on our behalf; and our own folk do fight for our rights, along with some clergy; plus, the laws and marches and festivals were nonexistent three decades ago—but we're still being attacked, verbally as well as physically. It's the pinnacle of contempt for us as sub-human beings."

and lesbian circles. Most of us don't want to face up to the fear—rather, we prefer to accept that we can hold hands in public, have weddings and kiss each other on the cheek; pleasantries we can watch on the small screen. But *Licensed to Kill* reminds us that the progress isn't complete; that the complacency is very dangerous, this not dealing with problems we think we can't conquer."

His pessimism comes out often: "We may just lose this battle, when it's easier to get a hate crimes bill passed through Congress than it is to actually stop the violence. If the goal is to stop the contempt and violence, then it's going to take an entire changeover in society."

Dong is distributing his film himself—always



Arthur Dong (right) with cinematographer Robert Shepard, while filming *Licensed to Kill*

While the attacks on sexual minorities are picking up, the reporting of the crimes is also picking up. In 1993, George Bush signed an anti-hate crime bill, which for the first time included protections for gay men and lesbians.

"The escalating numbers have to do with the backlash. As we become more powerful, we are compelling the anti-gay forces to come out of their own closets because we have become more visible and powerful," says Dong, who has been dealing with gay liberation for most of his adult life. He sees his activist role as reminding the public that "the war is far from over, and we must protest the huge level of complacency within gay

a risky financial move, but for this experienced filmmaker it's the only way to fine-tune the openings around the country. "I've been careful with this film, as it's taken me 20 years to make it. [Dong was mugged by gay-bashers in 1977.] I chose the 'right' way to tell this story and was careful in raising the money by going after funds which wouldn't encumber me. I wanted it done the best way."

He's had offers from other distributors, but felt that as an activist he wanted to make sure it got out there effectively. He premiered the film in April in Los Angeles and San Francisco, brings it to Portland on Aug. 14, and then in October he

begins a state-wide tour in Texas. "I want to create this presence in Texas, which is still a largely homophobic state. Oct. 26 is the sixth anniversary of the murder of [Vietnamese immigrant] Thanh Nguyen in Dallas. I want to build interest to the film's opening in Dallas on that date."

Arthur Dong has been married to the same man for 18 years, teacher Young Gee. They live in the Sunset Beach section of San Francisco, after a decade of living and working in Los Angeles. "Having been brought up in San Francisco in the '60s, with hope of social revolution, I hate seeing it wasted away. I accept that people may not want to go see this film, which hasn't yet been sold to television, although PBS may yet get involved."

As to future plans, the documentarian has a deep-seated wish to move into feature films. "As my entire output has dealt with the social issues concerning the Asian experience in America and gay history, I'd love to have [producer/director] Roger Corman call me one day and tell me how much he loves my work and how he just happens to have this film to make—fully funded—and he wants me to direct it."

One of the films he's hot to direct would be a remake of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1961 comic froth on Chinese immigration, *Flower Drum Song*—but done his way. "The musical is based on the novel, which in turn was based on the Chinese nightclub *Forbidden City* that I had profiled in my documentary. There was a strong gay underpinning to the place, a feeling I captured in the film. Allan Bérubé told me he uses *Forbidden City* in his gay and lesbian film studies classes at UC Santa Cruz."

Saying that Dong's scary 16mm documentary *Licensed to Kill* is a tough sell is an understatement. In all of the United States, there are only 60 theatrical venues able to play 16mm film, and Dong does not have the \$25,000 necessary to blow up the print to a commercially friendly 35mm format. His film cost \$140,000 to make, with family and friends joining him in putting up most of the cash.

In his five jobs as writer, director, editor, producer and now distributor, Dong has taken the financially risky position of taking no money upfront: "That would have raised the budget to over \$200,000. So by distributing it myself, I can be sure I'm getting the word out, and letting people know it's in their neighborhoods."

Arthur Dong will be present for a benefit showing of *Licensed to Kill* at the Northwest Film Center, 1219 SW Park Ave., at 7:30 pm Thursday, Aug. 14. Special admission is \$10; the show will benefit the Equity Foundation and the Film Center. Tickets are available in advance or at the door, call 221-1156. On Aug. 15 the film opens for a one-week run at Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave. Shows are at 7 pm nightly, and at 1 and 4 pm on Saturday and Sunday. General admission is \$5.50; call 223-4515 for more information.

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