

Alice Wu finds her voice again with *The Half of It*

By Lindsey Bahr
AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES — *The Half of It* director Alice Wu is not like other filmmakers. It's not because she happens to be Asian American, female, and gay, although that does put her in a rare class. Wu is not like other filmmakers because she doesn't really think of herself as one.

Even after two features, "I still am not somebody who is like, 'I am a filmmaker. What film shall I make?'" Wu said.

Regardless, Wu is indeed a filmmaker and an important one at that. She came onto the scene in 2004 with the film *Saving Face*, a dramedy about a woman who is closeted, and her mother, who is pregnant and unwed. It was the first Hollywood film featuring a Chinese-American cast since 1993's *The Joy Luck Club*. There wouldn't be another major American studio film with a predominately Asian cast until 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians*.

And Wu wouldn't have another writing and directing credit until 2020, with *The Half of It*, which is now on Netflix. It's a delightful spin on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, where a nerdy girl helps a dim-witted jock write love letters to the girl they both love.

Nancy Yuen, a Los-Angeles based sociologist and author of *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, said Wu is "a fascinating director."

"Wu captured immigrant life authentically before that was acceptable in Hollywood," Yuen said. "She was making a movie like *The Farewell* but 16 years ago!"

And both of her films focus on a lesbian lead: "A rarity not only in Asian-American films but all films," said Yuen.

Why the long gap between films? It's more complicated than the all-too common one where a woman directs a feature and



then can't get another made for over a decade. But nothing about Wu's story is conventional.

"As a kid I certainly never thought I could be a filmmaker. But I read a lot of books," Wu, 49, said. "In the back of my head, I thought someday when I retire, maybe I'll write something."

As the daughter of Chinese immigrants, Wu's goal was stability. It's why she ended up in computer science before it was, she said, a "hot career." But then she found herself downright bored with her Microsoft job, which had turned into a series of endless meetings about mission statements. So she started writing.

"It made me remember what it felt like to be passionate about something," Wu said.

She wrote what she knew and realized that film was the perfect way to tell her story.

"Growing up Chinese, nobody tells each other what they think," she said.



"Everything is unspoken. So film is a wonderful medium for that, where you have moments where you can show a character who's not aware they're being observed. You can actually show the truth and we get to suddenly see what they're really feeling."

With encouragement from a writing teacher, Wu gave herself five years to give Hollywood a shot. And it worked.

"The choice seems so easy now because the film did get made," Wu said. "But at the time I was agonizing over it."

Will Smith and Teddy Zee produced *Saving Face*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, and Sony Pictures Classics distributed it. But Wu wasn't prepared for the "what's next" question. She still couldn't believe that her "insane pipe dream" had come true.

Wu stayed in Hollywood doing work-for-hire writing projects and was about to have a big break with a series about women in tech when the writer's strike happened

VISIONARY VOICE. In the right photo, an image released by Netflix, Leah Lewis is seen in a scene from *The Half of It*, a romance about a high school loner who helps a jock woo the popular girl in school. The film's director, Alice Wu, left photo, is unlike other filmmakers, because she doesn't really think of herself as one. (KC Bailey/Netflix)

and her mother had a serious health scare in 2007.

"I dropped everything and went to San Francisco," she said.

A few weeks turned into a few months and a few months into years.

"I thought I'd left the industry entirely," Wu said.

But Wu's mother recovered and she started to think about purpose and her future. That led her to writing again, and, eventually to *The Half of It*.

Crazy Rich Asians director Jon M. Chu tweeted that Wu was "a pioneer" who was "way ahead of her time when I was first in awe of her and now the world has caught up."

And the landscape in Hollywood is quite different now for an Asian-American filmmaker who wants to tell Asian-American stories with the success of films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell*, and shows like "Fresh Off the Boat." Netflix has also had a fair number of projects including *Always Be My Maybe*, "Master of None," *Tigertail*, and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*.

Wu said she never felt limited by the facts of her life.

"I'm an Asian lesbian. I'm an immigrant. I feel like they're as American as anything else," she said. "The good thing is now people seem more open to it."

And this time she has a few stories she's been sitting on that she'd like to tell. In other words, it probably won't be another 16 years before the world gets a new film directed by Alice Wu.

Oregon Worker Relief Fund distributes \$750,000 in aid to immigrant Oregonians

Immigrants' rights advocates, together with Causa Oregon, Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), Latino Network, Innovation Law Lab, and the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), have announced that the Oregon Worker Relief Fund (OWRF) distributed \$750,000 in a first round of aid. Funds were disbursed to immigrants in Oregon facing financial hardships due to COVID-19, but who were excluded from federal stimulus relief or Unemployment Insurance due to their immigration status.

The OWRF is a multimillion-dollar initiative created in collaboration with more than 100 community partners throughout Oregon to provide temporary financial support to immigrant Oregonians during the COVID-19 crisis. Community partners are working quickly to simultaneously build online infrastructure, deploy resources, and continue fundraising to address urgent and significant needs for immigrant Oregonian workers and families.

"Oregonians are coming together so that all of our community's essential workers and their families — which includes farm workers, food-processing workers, housekeepers, construction workers, landscapers, caregivers, and day laborers — are able to survive the COVID-19 pandemic," said Adriana Miranda, executive director of Causa Oregon.

Individuals who received aid in the first round included essential immigrant workers who tested positive for COVID-19, rationed food for themselves and their families, and stopped buying critical medicine. As parents, many workers were forced to choose between paying for internet so their children could attend school or buying food and paying rent.

"The need is heartbreaking," said

Martha Sonato, political director at PCUN. "The Oregon Worker Relief Fund is critical to help immigrant Oregonians make ends meet during the pandemic. These individuals and families who have contributed to Oregon's collective prosperity cannot be forgotten."

The OWRF coalition has developed a rapid-response infrastructure to reach community members across the entire state, adhere to all public health recommendations, and deliver aid rapidly. Currently, 16 community-based organizations cover different regions and impacted communities with trained personnel acting as "navigators" to interview and document the need. Applications are submitted using an integrated, secure online platform. Every application is reviewed centrally and if approved, funds are disbursed using mobile payments and checks.

The Oregon Worker Relief Fund is supported by individual donors, philanthropic organizations, and state and local funding. The Oregon Legislature approved an initial \$10 million for the fund with bipartisan support in April.

"Advocates have done an incredible job putting this essential program together," said Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek. "I will continue to do all I can to support workers that are falling through the cracks and ensure no Oregonian gets left behind in this recovery."

There are an estimated 74,000 workers without legal status in Oregon, many of whom have jobs key to Oregon's prosperity. Also of note, one in every 10 children in Oregon live with a family member who is undocumented.

Members of the community who would like to donate to OWRF should visit <www.workerrelief.org/donate>.

Portland Chinese Scholarship Foundation deadline extended to Friday, June 26

Applications for awards offered through the Portland Chinese Scholarship Foundation are due June 26, 2020. Available scholarships range from \$500 to \$2,000.

Student applicants, who must have at least 50% Chinese ethnicity, are judged on criteria such as academic performance, community service, leadership activities,

Multnomah and Washington Counties intend to apply for Phase 1 reopening in Oregon this month

With the exception of Multnomah and Washington Counties, all other counties in Oregon have started Phase 1 reopening. The two remaining counties are planning to apply to enter Phase 1.

Under Oregon's Stay Home Executive Order (#20-12) to control the spread of the novel coronavirus, residents living in counties not yet in Phase 1 are asked to stay home except for essential needs. Residents who are already in Phase 1 are still advised to remain very cautious about social interactions outside their immediate household.

Allowed activities — while keeping six feet away from others — include visits to grocery stores; banks and credit unions; pharmacies; certain retail stores; take-out/delivery from restaurants and bars; veterinary care and pet stores; gas stations; outdoor activities such as walking your dog, jogging, or biking in your neighborhood; childcare facilities and

financial need, work ethic, and athletic achievement.

To learn more, or to download an application, visit <www.oregonccha.org/scholarships>. Application questions may be directed to Gloria Wong at (503) 236-7966 or Sarah Chung at (503) 288-3819.

babysitters (only if abiding by new rules); some state parks (day use only); and hospitals, healthcare, and non-urgent procedures.

Under the order, activities not allowed are: social gatherings (parties, celebrations) with people outside of your household; dine-in restaurants and bars; nightclubs and concerts; shopping at outdoor or indoor malls and retail complexes; gyms, sports and fitness centers, health clubs, exercise studios, dance and yoga studios; hair salons, barbershops, nail salons, day spas, massage services, non-medical wellness spas, cosmetic stores, and tattoo parlors; theaters, amusement parks, arcades, bowling alleys, music concerts, sporting events, museums, and skating rinks; some state parks, playgrounds, some campgrounds, pools, skate parks, and festivals.

To learn more, visit <https://govstatus.egov.com/or-covid-19>.

Spike in coronavirus cases in Oregon traced to gatherings

REDMOND, Ore. (AP) — A spike in reported coronavirus cases in Redmond in late May has been tied to family and social gatherings in the area.

A story by *The Oregonian*/OregonLive said the breakdown of coronavirus cases by ZIP code in Oregon reported eight new cases of COVID-19 in the central Oregon town. That brought Redmond up to only

18 reported cases to date, but amounted to an 80% change over the previous week — the highest in the state.

Public health officials in Deschutes County told KTVZ that most of the county's new cases can be traced to social gatherings with extended family, like barbecues and celebrations.

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