

C A M E O S



ACTOR

B. D. WONG

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would love to wear a coolie hat and talk with a funny accent—someday. "I can't wait for the time when I can make fun of my culture and my heritage," says the Chinese American actor, "but that can't be done until there is a ground-level awareness that we are all equal. Only then can we have a good time fooling around."

Best known for his Tony award-winning performance as the transvestite Peking Opera star in David Henry Hwang's *M.*

Butterfly, Wong was involved in last year's *Miss Saigon* casting controversy and is now widely identified as an activist for Asian American artists. Soon to be seen in Disney's *Father of the Bride*, he is also one of the few Asian American actors in American films. However, with his five films (one, *The Lounge People*, hasn't been released), Wong has yet to achieve the status he has in the theater. In fact, he would rather forget his movie debut, a bit part in Sidney Lumet's *Family Business*. A small role in *The Freshman* followed. It gave him a brief moment with Marlon Brando, but if you stepped out to buy popcorn, you might have missed him altogether.

His first costarring role was as a Chinese drug-ring leader in the comedy-thriller *Mystery Date*, and his performance was singled out by several critics. But the role came dangerously close to a stereotype, equating Asians with crime and the underworld. So Wong strove to make his character less of an outsider. "I tried to push the comedy so that I was right there with the two white leads, participating in the movie as a member of an ensemble," he says.

Wong jokes that he measures his satisfaction with a shoot by the number of times he said to the director, "Excuse me, could I talk to you for a minute?" When a white extra decided to put on yellowface makeup for a scene in a Chinese restaurant in *Mystery Date*, "I had to be the party pooper," Wong reports. "Everyone

BRAD TRENT/OUTLINE GROOMING; NANCY SPRAGUE



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B. D. WONG: WHY NOT THE GUY NEXT DOOR?

thought it was funny, like Halloween, but they don't have the sensibility of what decades of yellowface in the movies mean. A part of you dies when you watch a Caucasian actor bastardize your whole existence for the sake of comedy."

Wong was born and raised in San Francisco, where he began his career in musical theater. After dropping out of college and performing for several years in dinner theater and showcases, he got his big break in *M. Butterfly* in 1988.

Since his movie parts so far have been small, he has learned to concentrate on the "physical presentation" of his characters. "My experience of playing a woman in *M. Butterfly* taught me the power of the wardrobe," he says with a smile.

In the script for *Father of the Bride*, Wong's character, the assistant to "wedding coordinator from hell" Martin Short, was not specifically described as Asian. But the filmmakers, realizing that the part called for a comic approach rather than a specific type, cast Wong. Short, who was given free rein to improvise, marvels at Wong's ability to wing it along with him. "He was always right there," Short says. "Nothing could throw him, because he was very much into the details of creating his character."

Reviewing *Mystery Date*, one critic sympathized with actors like Wong who have to make do with parts that aren't equal to their talent. "I'm ready to play a real part, one with three-dimensional life and enough

screen time that you can relax," Wong concurs. He'd like to play an everyday person "somebody's next-door neighbor or be friend." Only then, he figures, can he aspire to playing the lead character—the person who *has* the neighbor or the friend. He pauses for a moment, then adds, "Isn't sad that I can't even *think* of myself as that person yet?"

GERARD RAYMOND