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Michael Kang and Teddy Zee: *Wild West 32nd*

Wendy Mitchell in New York

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Wendy Mitchell meets director Michael Kang and producer Teddy Zee, whose gangland drama *West 32nd* marks the first US production for Korean powerhouse CJ Entertainment.

It was a memorable meeting of minds at Sundance 2005, where director Michael Kang was premiering his coming-of-age story *The Motel*, and producer Teddy Zee was showcasing *Saving Face*. They met at a party, where Kang passed out from exhaustion and hit the floor.

Luckily, the pair have recovered from that collapse and recently hosted the world premiere of their drama about Korean-American gangsters, *West 32nd* at the Tribeca Film Festival.

Kang had the idea for *West 32nd* back when he was writing the script for *The Motel*. He was inspired by an article in New York's counter-culture newspaper *Village Voice* about Korean gangs written by Edmund Lee, who consequently co-wrote the script with Kang.

"I'm a huge fan of *Serpico* and *Mean Streets* and other crime movies from the 1970s. And I'm also inspired by the Korean New Wave, so this story seemed to capture both," Kang says. "I think it's a new genre of international film."

Zee, a studio veteran with stints at Columbia and Paramount and executive producer of worldwide hit *The Pursuit Of Happyness*, convinced his friends at Korea-based powerhouse CJ Entertainment to come on board for production and sales - marking their first US film.

With CJ's help, they pulled in a strong cast: John Cho of *Harold And Kumar* fame, Hong Kong-born Jun Sung Kim, *Battlestar Galactica* veteran Grace Park, TV actress Jane Kim and Korean superstar Jun-ho Jeong. The film shot for 27 days in Manhattan and Queens.

Zee believes cinema should reflect the fact "the face of America is changing". He points to good signs that Asian faces are starring in hit US TV shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Lost* and *Heroes*. He hopes films such as *West 32nd* will help grow the Asian-American film industry, in much the same way African-American films such as *Boyz N The Hood* paved the way for different kinds of stories, such as *The Pursuit Of Happyness*. Zee says: "Mike's movie can start the progress."

Meanwhile, Kang, who has relocated from New York to Los Angeles, has his eyes on Hollywood. "I'm interested in bigger films," he says. "I'd like to get out of the indie ghetto."

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