



Cheung, Leslie (1956-2003)

by Linda Rapp

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Leslie Cheung first gained legions of fans in Asia as a pop singer. He went on to a successful career as an actor, appearing in sixty films, including the award-winning *Farewell My Concubine*. Androgynously handsome, he sometimes played sexually ambiguous characters, as well as romantic leads in both gay- and heterosexually-themed films.

Leslie Cheung, born Cheung Kwok-wing on September 12, 1956, was the tenth and youngest child of a Hong Kong tailor whose clients included Alfred Hitchcock and William Holden.

At the age of twelve Cheung was sent to boarding school in England. While there he adopted the English name Leslie, in part because he admired Leslie Howard and *Gone with the Wind*, but also because the name is "very unisex."

Cheung studied textiles at Leeds University, but when he returned to Hong Kong, he did not go into his father's profession. He entered a music talent contest on a Hong Kong television station and took second prize with his rendition of Don McLean's *American Pie*.

His appearance in the contest led to acting roles in soap operas and drama series, and also launched his singing career. After issuing two poorly received albums, *Day Dreamin'* (1977) and *Lover's Arrow* (1979), Cheung hit it big with *The Wind Blows On* (1983), which was a bestseller in Asia and established him as a rising star in the "Cantopop" style. He would eventually make over twenty albums in Cantonese and Mandarin.

Quickly gaining an enthusiastic fan following, Cheung played concerts in packed theaters, auditoriums, and stadiums. Although never as well known in North America, Cheung drew full houses for his concerts at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas in 2000, the tickets for which cost as much as \$238.

Cheung also embarked on a movie career. His first film was the soft-porn *Erotic Dream of the Red Chamber* (1978).

In his next film, Patrick Tam's *Nomad* (1982), Cheung played a young man fixated on his mother. The initial version included a scene in which Cheung's character, clad only in underwear, fondled himself while talking on the telephone with his mother. Hong Kong censors objected, and the scene had to be reshot with Cheung in trousers.

Cheung had a featured role as a rookie policeman in John Woo's 1986 crime thriller *A Better Tomorrow*, one of the films that established the Hong Kong action genre. He also appeared in the movie's two sequels (1987 and 1989).

Cheung was one of the stars of Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1989). In this stylish drama, he played a young man who falls in love with a courtesan who is dressed as a man when he first encounters her. The young man

reneges on a suicide pact with his sweetheart, whose ghost returns to visit him fifty years later.

Cheung also starred in Wong Kar-Wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990), this time as a callous, womanizing playboy, a role that earned him the Best Actor Prize at the Hong Kong Film Awards.

Shortly after this success, Cheung announced his retirement from his singing career and moved to Vancouver, British Columbia for a short time.

Chen next went to China to make Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film but was banned in China because of its homosexual theme.

In *Farewell My Concubine* Cheung played a young actor at the Peking Opera who specialized in women's roles. This was in accordance with the Opera's tradition that all characters, male and female, were portrayed by men. In preparation for his role, Cheung spent months studying the conventional movements and gestures used by the Opera's actors for such parts. He also learned the dialect of Beijing for the film.

Cheung's character in *Farewell My Concubine* is a boy who is made to chant "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" to prepare him for a career impersonating women. The youth is befriended by one of the Opera's leading men, of whom he becomes enamored. Critic Jay Carr called Cheung's performance the "most affecting and unceasingly fascinating" of the film.

Cheung next appeared in Peter Chan's gender-bending comedy *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1995), playing a man who falls in love with a woman disguised as a man.

In Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (1996) Cheung starred as an unsympathetic heterosexual character, a manipulative, blackmailing gigolo. Although the film was considered somewhat flawed, critic Stephen Holden described Cheung's performance in it as "arresting."

Cheung played one of a pair of gay lovers in Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* (1997), an ironically titled piece because the couple, who make a trip to Argentina to rekindle their relationship, fail to find their longed-for happiness.

Cheung's personal situation was more fortunate. After making *Happy Together*, he came out publicly and acknowledged his lover, Tong Hock Tak, a banker. Speculation about Cheung's sexual orientation had been rife for some years, but he had always dodged questions, fearing that revelation of his relationship might be deleterious to Tong's career. By this time, however, Cheung's fortune--skillfully managed by Tong--had grown to the point that Tong was able to retire from his job.

Still, coming out was not without risk for Cheung since very few star Asian entertainers are openly gay. In this case, reported Ronald Bergan, "the move did nothing to diminish his following; it only increased it."

In the late 1990s Cheung resumed his singing career. His comeback album, *Legend* (1997), was a great success, and several more bestsellers followed. He returned to the concert stage as well, and in 2000 played a year-long "Passion" tour, described by Allan Hunter as "noted for the kind of spectacular costume changes and flamboyant attitude that would have made Liberace seem self-effacing." His onstage wardrobe featured eight outfits by Jean-Paul Gaultier, including a white tuxedo with angel wings, gold hot pants, and a "naughty skirt."

In reviving his singing career, Cheung made music videos, one of which "featured a *pas de deux* (with a Japanese male ballet dancer) so sexy that it was banned by TVB, Hong Kong's top channel."

In his last film, Law Chi-Leung's *Inner Senses* (2002), Cheung played a psychiatrist tempted by evil spirits to

kill himself. Thus, fans who heard of Cheung's suicide on April 1, 2003, hoped at first that the story might be a macabre April Fool's Day joke. But soon they learned that Cheung had indeed taken his own life by jumping from a twenty-fourth floor balcony at Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

Cheung, who had long suffered from depression and had reportedly tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills the previous year, left a note in which he thanked Tong, his family, and his friends, but concluded poignantly, "I have not done one single bad thing in my life. Why is it like that?"

Disconsolate fans quickly created a shrine at the spot of Cheung's death. Their memorial offerings of flowers, notes, personal mementos, and photographs covered half a block. Admirers of all ages joined in paying tribute to the popular artist.

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