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'The Price Is Right' Helped Shape the Zany Game Show Aesthetic of 'Quiz Lady'

Awkwafina and Sandra Oh, come on down!

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"Quiz Lady" Michele K Short

When hearing the logline for Hulu's new movie **"Quiz Lady"** — a wild sister prods her shy sibling into appearing on a quiz show to pay off debts — one could be forgiven for assuming that Sandra Oh plays the more together Jenny and Awkwafina the one getting into shenanigans. But one of the delights of the **Jessica Yu**-helmed comedy is watching these two actresses play atypical roles. It's Oh who roars into town and Awkwafina who has to be forced off her couch and away from her stockpile of popcorn. And the fun they're having is contagious.

"Sandra's character is entirely inappropriate and self-serving and kind of stuck in the past," Yu told IndieWire. "But she's not fully accepting that. [Sandra and I] talked about what was the period in Jenny's growing up that she can't let go of, and we decided it was kind of like, late '90s, early aughts. I think she's got a little Ariana Grande that she's trying to cling to."

As for Awkwafina's Anne, the character's goal is to blend in as much as possible, until a dognapping requires her to move outside her comfort zone and compete on "Can't Stop the Quiz," a nightly game show hosted by a bowtie-clad Will Ferrell. "There was a plainness, all the neutral tones that kind of match the tones of the cubicle at work," Yu said. "So there were weird discussions where we're thinking, 'OK, the wall is this and her skin color is that. What's anything in between that we could dress her in?'"

Estranged when "**Quiz Lady**" begins, Jenny and Anne reach a wary detente in order to pay off their mother's gambling debt and rescue Anne's dog — but that rapprochement is tested repeatedly as they tentatively embark on a road trip to first audition for "Can't Stop the Quiz" and then try to dethrone the smirking current champion (played by Jason Schwartzbaum in full smug slimeball mode). Along the way, there is a Benjamin Franklin-themed hotel, a drug-fueled audition, and Oh revealing a gift for slapstick comedy. But even as the comedy goes broad, the relationship between the sisters never settles for easy answers or sentimentality.

"We really tried to spend a lot of time in prep just talking about the script, talking about these relationships, the backstories, so that that bedrock was there for those more weighty moments," Yu said. "Because I think if you get that right, then you can stray and you can come back, right? But I think a perfect example is a scene in the emergency room, where it starts with some physical comedy. And then it gets to somewhere more real than anything we've seen in the movie up to that point. And watching our actors navigate that was really so satisfying."

Equally satisfying is watching Awkwafina nervously navigate her appearance on "Can't Stop the Quiz," here the attention and the exposure threaten to unravel her ability to win. An outrageous combination of "Jeopardy!" and charades, the game is both soothing in its rhythms and unsettling in its sudden swerves away from trivia. And for shy Anne, the prospect of acting out clues is truly terrifying.

"With the game show, we wanted it to feel kind of like Oz, right? So the color, everything feels the light. It feels different from anything else in the **film**," Yu said. "So what was fun was to be able to visit 'The Price Is Right' and just get a feeling for that. And our production designer, Jeff Mann, did a lot of research. We wanted to walk the line between a show where you're required to be very smart, but also where there's playfulness."

"The other thing I loved is it really gave a chance for our actors to just order off the menu [playing charades]. And so some of it was them just working off each other and going for it. There were, in the script, some indications of how they would start certain clues. And then the actor sometimes would just add a little extra something."

And with a cast like that, a little extra something is a winning formula.