



WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

# My Blueberry Nights

## Wong Kar Wai on 'My Blueberry Nights'

*What was the primary impulse behind the film?*

I was in New York, doing some research for *Lady from Shanghai*, a project I have with Nicole Kidman, and I somehow got the chance to meet Norah Jones. We sat and talked in a cafe in SoHo. I found her character very straightforward and confident, and so I asked her if she'd ever thought about acting. She didn't ask why I was asking, she just said, 'You think I can act?' So I said, 'Why not?' I suggested that we should work together and told her I had a story I'd come up with a few years ago that might be the idea we could start from.

The story was one I used in a short film called *In the Mood for Love 2001*, which was screened in Cannes that year but hasn't really been seen since. It's about a chance encounter in a convenience store in Hong Kong between two people, played by Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung, who may or may not have a relationship. I showed Norah Jones the short film and we started thinking about moving it to the United States and expanding it. So the main reason to make the film in English was that Norah obviously couldn't do it in Chinese. And I guess some of her attitude rubbed off on me: that 'why shouldn't I give it a try?'

*Was it very intimidating to work in the US?*

I know I'm not the first foreign director to make a film that looks at America. I think the way I work is quite well known: I don't build stories, I build characters. I always have to know all about the people in the film, so even if we see this woman only in a café, I have to know where she came from, what she was doing yesterday. I need all that background. If I shoot with Tony and Maggie in Hong Kong, I can easily imagine what's around them and what's behind their characters. But I needed to be able to do that with my American characters too. When I look at an Edward Hopper painting, I can feel the existence of the people he shows. The question I need to ask is always, 'What impression do I get from this face, this gesture?'

*How did you settle on the novelist Lawrence Block as your script collaborator?*

Since the film was going to be in English, I knew I'd need help to write the script. I can't be the one telling the story myself; I have to be behind someone else, outside looking in. I knew Larry's novels and short stories from long ago, but I hadn't met him. I especially liked his character Matt Scudder, a private eye in New York who has a drink problem. He used to be a cop but he accidentally killed someone so he had to quit the force and become a private detective. Knowing those stories made me think I should try to get Larry to help me.

Actually my first thought was to get a different writer for each 'chapter' of the film: one for the first and last chapters in New York, one for the chapter in Memphis, Tennessee, and one for the chapter set in a small town in Nevada. But Larry is very fast, and he understood immediately what I was trying to do,

so I asked him if he could write it all. It was only about two months from the time we had the idea to the start of shooting.

*How did you decide where the 'chapters' would be set?*

Once we'd decided on the first and last chapters in New York we had to figure out what would happen in between. So I got into a car with my cinematographer Darius Khondji and my production manager and started driving. We made several trips, each of 10 to 12 days, driving for 14 to 16 hours each day. Mostly we started in the evening, drove through the night and reached a place in the early morning; sometimes it was the other way around. The basic idea was that Elizabeth, Norah's character, should move across country from east to west.

I felt from the start that one chapter should be set in the south. A lot of the Americana I like originates there, including much of the music. Norah herself is from Texas, so I asked her if she could recommend any place for us to check out. She told us there was a town called Love, which sounded interesting, but it turned out to be very ordinary. We finally settled on Memphis.

We also headed for Las Vegas, which is in every way the opposite of the south. But somehow we got lost in the Nevada desert and ended up in a small town outside Vegas. Basically it's just one main street, but it has a very old hotel with a casino in the basement. We reached this place one morning after driving through the night. It was totally empty, hardly anyone in the casino, but we realised it had once been an important town. The hotel had Nevada's first elevator; it had been a staging post for Hollywood stars on their way to Vegas and so the rooms were named after them. I thought this would be a good place for Elizabeth to get lost.

*And Elizabeth's emotional trajectory? How did you determine that?*

I always have books with me when I travel and I had three on these trips, all of which influenced my thinking. One was Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain*, which is a kind of photo album with texts that chronicles the most unhappy days of her life from a vantage point of 15 years later. She has been stood up by a man. She keeps repeating her story to different people, and each time she tells it, it becomes less detailed until by the end it's very vague. The book is full of things I like. At one point she wanders around an unfamiliar city, goes into a diner and orders sausage – a dish she hates! – and she doesn't know why.

Another book (I've forgotten the title) was a guide to quitting addictions – smoking, drinking, bad relationships, everything. It's very schematic: the writer says that when you reach this stage, you can expect to have this symptom, and so on. I found myself using this book like a menu, with the chapters in the film becoming like the stages in the writer's analysis of withdrawal from addiction.

And the third book was a collection of Lawrence Sanders' stories. All his recurrent characters appear in it and I came to see that many of them are variations on Larry himself. That got me thinking that one of our characters should be a cop. And since we were going to shoot in Memphis, I found myself also thinking about Tennessee Williams and that we should maybe do a tribute to him. So I proposed that to Larry: 'I want to have a story about a cop and his problem with his wife.' Larry didn't travel with us, but I drew a lot of inspiration from him. For instance, he's an active marathon runner and that ended up becoming part of the background of Jeremy, the Jude Law character.

*I know the actual shoot was fairly tight, so I wonder if you found any time for the 'trying out ideas' approach you bring to your Chinese films?*

In some ways there was even more of that than in the Chinese films. I had to involve all the cast and crew. At the start of the shoot I told everybody: 'We've seen so many films about Chinese people made by foreigners which look very weird to us, and I don't want to repeat that mistake! Even if I spent three years here working on this film, I'd never see things as an American does. So I need all of you to be involved in commenting and giving advice.' They were a bit shocked at first, because of course they're used to having directors tell them exactly what they want. But they got into it, and we ended up having a lot of fun together. They were surprised when I gave them a script; they thought I didn't work with one at all. And we did make changes as we went along, often in response to their suggestions, though all of the changes were to bring us closer to the characters.

**Wong Kar Wai interviewed by Tony Rayns, *Sight & Sound*, March 2008**

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#### **MY BLUEBERRY NIGHTS**

*Directed by:* Wong Kar Wai  
*©/Presented by:* Block 2 Pictures  
*Production Companies:* Jet Tone Films, Lou Yi Limited  
*With the participation of:* Shanghai Film Group Corporation  
*Presented by:* StudioCanal  
*Executive Producer:* Chan Ye Cheng  
*Produced by:* Wong Kar Wai, Jean-Louis Piel  
*Producers:* Jacky Pang Yee Wah, Wang Wei  
*Line Producers:* Alice Chan, Pamela Thur-weir  
*Unit Production Manager:* Pamela Thur-weir  
*Production Supervisors:* Andy Wheeler, Kim Surowicz  
*Production Accountant:* Andy Wheeler  
*Location Managers (NY City):* Patty Carey Perrazzo, Sam Hutchins, Tom Yeager  
*Location Manager (Memphis):* Diego Prange  
*Location Manager (Nevada):* Kristi Frankenheimer  
*1st Assistant Directors:* H.H. Cooper, Glen Trotiner  
*Script Supervisor:* Massoumeh Emami  
*CASTING:* Avy Kaufman  
*Screenplay by:* Wong Kar Wai, Lawrence Block  
*Story by:* Wong Kar Wai  
*Director of Photography:* Darius Khondji  
*2nd Unit Director of Photography:* Gene Engels  
*Hong Kong Director of Photography:* Kwan Pun-leung  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Felipe Reinheimer  
*Gaffer:* Gene Engels  
*Key Grip:* Michael Coe  
*Still Photographer:* Macall Polay  
*Visual Effects by:* Oriental Post  
*Additional Visual Effects by:* Big Film Design  
*Edited by:* William Chang Suk Ping  
*Assistant Editor:* Andy Chan Chi Wai  
*Production Design by:* William Chang Suk Ping  
*Art Director:* Judy Rhee  
*Property Master:* Jill Alexander  
*Costume Design by:* William Chang Suk Ping, Sharon Globerson  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Sarah 'Lee' Harper  
*Key Make-up Artist:* Núria Sitjà  
*Key Hairstylist:* Mandy Lyons

*Original Score by:* Ry Cooder  
*Supervising Sound Designer:* Michael Baird  
*Sound Designer:* Claude Letessier  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Drew Kunin  
*Boom Operator:* Kira Smith  
*Sound Mixed by:* Jonathan Wales, Scott Hinkley  
*Supervising Dialogue Editor:* Walter Spencer  
*Dialogue Editor:* Michael Ferdie  
*Sound Effects Recordists:* Duane Estill, Smith Long  
*Stunt Co-ordinators:* Max Maxwell, Brian Smyj  
*Dialogue Consultant:* Telly Wong

#### **Cast**

Norah Jones (*Elizabeth*)  
Jude Law (*Jeremy*)  
David Strathairn (*Arnie*)  
Rachel Weisz (*Sue Lynne*)  
Natalie Portman (*Leslie*)  
Chan Marshall (*Katya*)  
Chad Davis (*boyfriend*)  
Katya Blumenberg (*girlfriend*)  
John Malloy (*diner manager*)  
Demetrius Butler (*male customer*)  
Frankie Faison (*Travis*)  
Adriane Lenox (*Sandy*)  
Benjamin Kanen (*Randy*)  
Michael Hartnett (*Sunglasses*)  
Michael May (*Aloha*)  
Jesse Garon (*young poker player*)  
Sam Hill (*fat guy*)  
Tracy Blackwell (*matron*)  
Michael Delano (*cowboy*)  
Audrei Kairen (*poker player*)  
Bill Hollis (*doctor*)  
Charles Clayton Blackwell (*used car salesman*)  
Hector Leguillow (*cook*)

China/France/USA/Hong Kong 2007  
95 mins

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#### **WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI**

**My Blueberry Nights** Fri 23 Jul 20:50; Wed 28 Jul 20:40  
**Days of Being Wild (Ah Fei jing juen)** Sat 24 Jul 15:00  
**In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)**  
Sat 24 Jul 20:35; Tue 27 Jul 14:40; Thu 29 Jul 20:45, 20:55  
**Fallen Angels (Do lok tin si)** Sun 25 Jul 18:30; Mon 26 Jul 14:30  
**The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)** Mon 26 Jul 20:50  
**Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)** Wed 28 Jul 18:00  
**2046** Wed 28 Jul 14:30; Sat 31 Jul 14:30  
**Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)** Thu 29 Jul 14:30, 14:45  
**The Hand (Extended Cut)** Fri 30 Jul 18:20  
**Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)** Fri 30 Jul 20:45

#### **Media partner**

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Visit [Youtube.com/bfi](https://www.youtube.com/bfi) for a dizzying tour in the World of Wong Kar Wai, guided by season programmer Ann Lee