



THE Pursuit *of* Happiness

HE'S ALREADY TAKEN CHINA TO HIS HEART; NOW **ALLAN ZEMAN** IS TAKING LAN KWAI FONG TO THE HEART OF CHINA. THE IRREPRESSIBLE ENTREPRENEUR, AND RECIPIENT OF THE HONG KONG TATLER DIAMOND AWARD 2012, TELLS **PAUL KAY** WHY HE'S SPREADING THE LOVE

[Red Bar]
PORTRAITS BY EDMON LEONG

IF A BILLIONAIRE BUSINESSMAN TELLS YOU THEY were born to make people happy, a healthy dose of scepticism is usually warranted. But when Allan Zeman says it, I can't help but believe him. ¶ It's not just that he's the man who built Lan Kwai Fong, an area that has become synonymous with nightlife in Hong Kong and soon, perhaps, in the whole of China. Nor is it because, as chairman of Ocean Park, he has transformed the once-ailing landmark into one of the most successful theme parks in the world. Much more simply, what makes Zeman's claim difficult to refute is his natural exuberance, a force of spirit that is as infectious as his trademark beaming smile. If you believe in auras, it's easy to imagine that Zeman's is lit up like a Christmas tree.

We're sitting in Zeman's bright and spacious office, which, perhaps inevitably, overlooks the area that made him famous. Simple, tasteful furniture and pieces by Chinese artists such as Liu Jianhua, Liu Bolin and Yu Fan are positioned around the room, as are stacks of coffee-table books on art, fashion, show business and Hong Kong. A scale model of the New California Tower looks down towards the site that will soon be occupied by the real thing, and a clutch of awards are neatly laid out on the cabinet behind Zeman's broad desk. Among the gongs is Zeman's most recent, the Diamond Award bestowed on him by *Hong Kong Tatler* at our 35th Anniversary Ball.



The rapturous applause and wholehearted cheers that welcomed him to the stage that night made abundantly clear the warmth of feeling Zeman inspires in his peers. His snap decision to match *Tatler's* accompanying HK\$100,000 donation to the Hong Kong Cancer Fund (HKCF) was a typical Zeman gesture, and one that encouraged HKCF founder Sally Lo to dash to the podium, offering her thanks and congratulations to "one of the most generous men I know."

"I believe I was put on this Earth to bring happiness to people, to bring enjoyment to their lives. That's in everything I do," says Zeman. "All of our businesses are creative, from fashion to theme parks to entertainment to Lan Kwai Fong to film to... you name it. That's always been part of my life, being creative, being a creative person."

To this end, Zeman works seven days a week, but says with a laugh that, "For me, doing interviews is work. My other work is not work." Even when relaxing on a boat in Phuket, where he owns a home and the luxurious Andara Resort & Villas, he admits that he'll invariably be on the phone discussing some project or other. "It's just my way," he says with a shrug. "I'm not really an uptight person. I'm relaxed at almost everything I do. Even if I get upset, it's only for a second. I'll forget about it and think of something positive. It's my nature. I've always been that way."

German-born Zeman grew up in Montreal and made his first C\$1 million by the age of 20, importing lingerie and other clothes from Hong Kong and China. He moved to Hong Kong in 1975, setting



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up fashion exporter Colby International Group (which he sold to Li & Fung in 2000) and opening his first venue in Lan Kwai Fong eight years later. Today, his interests include After Dark Films and fashion business Algo Group, while he is a director of Wynn Resorts Las Vegas and vice-chairman of Wynn Macau. He's also on the board of the Star Ferry Company, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (where he's chairman of its Performing Arts Committee), the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Hong Kong Community Chest. Husband to Charmaine, and father to Marisa and Jonathan, Zeman has received just about every major honour his adopted city can bestow, including Justice of the Peace, the Gold Bauhinia Star and the Grand Bauhinia Medal.

But it is Lan Kwai Fong and, more recently, Ocean Park that he is best known for. Ocean Park, says Zeman, "is a full-time job. To me, it's like my own company." Under his chairmanship, the theme park has flourished. Annual visitor numbers have more than doubled, from 2.9 million when Zeman took over in 2003 to an expected 7.45 million this

year. The numbers are helped by events such as the annual month-long Halloween festivities, during which the flamboyant chairman invariably dresses up ("I've been everything from a Brazilian female carnival dancer and different Chinese emperors to Madonna, Lady Gaga, Michael Jackson... you name it," says Zeman). New rides and attractions have been added regularly, and there's more on the way: themed hotels, an ice-rink and the return of the much-missed water park (this time with indoor as well as outdoor areas) are all in the pipeline, not to mention an MTR station that Zeman was instrumental in securing, one which he says "will change the nature of that whole south side." All of this has contributed to Ocean Park's most recent and perhaps greatest accolade, the Applause Award bestowed upon it in mid-November. This honour, which is the theme park industry's equivalent of an Oscar, has been awarded biannually since 1980.

Not that it's all been plain sailing – Ocean Park has been criticised periodically by activists unhappy at its continued use of dolphin shows. But Zeman is refreshingly candid about the subject, and

HAIL TO THE CHIEF
FROM LEFT
Zeman with wife Charmaine and his Hong Kong *Tatler* Diamond Award; the Ocean Park chairman promotes a new attraction in typically eye-catching style



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sincere in his view that promoting animal interaction is a worthy endeavour. “I realise some people have other ideas on how to do things, and I respect their ideas. I try to engage with them,” says Zeman. “But by the same token, we train people who believe in what they do as passionately as the activists, who believe in trying to bring animals and people closer to one another, and that’s always been the message. Every once in a while you get attacked. It’s a normal process being in that business. But as long as you believe in what you’re doing, and you really believe it’s right, keep doing it.”

This is a mantra you could argue applies equally to Zeman’s other baby, Lan Kwai Fong, where he opened his first restaurant in 1983 to cater to his Western fashion clients. Zeman recalls that, at that time, the area was known as Fringe Central, and it was “just a backlot of a bunch of different warehouses selling embroidered tablecloths from China.” But, displaying typical Zeman foresight, he sensed that “there’s a little magic there” and elected to open an eatery in the nondescript neighbourhood, choosing the name California due to its universal connotations of “Rodeo Drive, movie stars, Hollywood, sun, sex, girls.”

Many more restaurants, bars and developments soon followed, firmly establishing the area as the city’s party central. Now, almost 30 years on, Lan Kwai Fong is undergoing an evolution courtesy of the construction of the New California Tower. The 27-floor building, which will boast 15-foot ceilings and terraces on the first eight levels when it opens late next year, is designed to put Lan Kwai Fong back at the cutting-edge of Hong Kong’s nightlife scene. Confirmed tenants include iconic nightclub brand Ku De Ta, which will occupy the top two floors, and a new restaurant by Harlan Goldstein, while Pure Fitness will provide a place to work off all those calories across six floors.

Never short of imitators, Zeman notes that one architect he works with has already been approached by a Causeway Bay company, which showed him a brochure for the new tower and asked if he could replicate it for them. “The building’s not even up and people are already copying it,” says Zeman with a laugh. “So that’s the best form of flattery. It’s great. I’m very proud of it, and I’m sure it’ll be a landmark.”

But it’s not only in Hong Kong that Lan Kwai Fong is forging ahead. Buoyed by the reputation of the original, the brand looks set to expand across the whole of China in the next few years. “Every city now wants a Lan Kwai Fong,” says Zeman with a grin. He’s doing his damndest to make sure they get their wish. Chengdu came first, launching in late 2010, and Hainan is up next, with a 538,000sqft complex scheduled for completion at Mission Hills Haikou by 2015. Ningbo and Wuxi are in the pipeline, and Zeman says he has been approached by “about 15 differ-

ent governments in China” that want a Lan Kwai Fong of their very own. “Lan Kwai Fong is not just bars and restaurants,” explains Zeman. “It’s shops, it’s residential, office buildings; it’s really creating a new area in a city. It changes the life of the city, it becomes a major attraction. It’s something that we understand how to do. We’re good at it; we’ve grown up with this.”

Having done business in China since the early 1970s (“I was probably one of the first ones into China,” he says, “I could write a book about my experiences in China over the years”), Zeman has huge affection for, and belief in, the country. Indeed, he gave up his Canadian passport in 2008 to assume Chinese citizenship. “China is such a big place, and I believe we have a long way to go,” says Zeman. “There’s a lot of money in China, the culture and the people are great... I mean, I love China. The next 10, 15 years, if you’re a young person, that’s where I’d be, that’s where I’d be concentrating on. The opportunities are good in China. Huge. And if you get it right, you can do very, very well.” But, Zeman warns, “Don’t try to change China. Try to understand the culture. Just because you do business one way does not mean that that’s the way you’re going to force people to do it – because the culture is much older than you.”

The savvy developer is in the process of creating a fund to build further Lan Kwai Fongs on the mainland, and says he wouldn’t rule out an IPO at some point – but that’s not to say he’d ever think of selling up. “It’s like, ‘Would you ever think of selling one of your children?’” says Zeman, plainly. “Obviously the value of the property [of Lan Kwai Fong Hong Kong] has increased 50 times since I

bought it, so if I wanted to then, of course, I could cash it in and get a lot of money... and then do what?” He shrugs. “So I think it’ll stay in the family for, hopefully, generations.”

Given the expansion that’s underway, it’s hard to put a limit on the kind of empire those future generations of Zemans might inherit. But, I ask, how does Zeman think he would fare if he were starting out fresh in today’s uncertain economic climate?

“If you go back to Thomas Edison’s days, or Henry Ford’s, times are always difficult,” muses Zeman. “The world is not an easy place. It can be very difficult if you think of it that way, or it can be easy if your attitude is that it’s easy. If you grow up being positive rather than negative, being happy with whatever it is you have, you can do anything. So I think that as a young man you can always start out, it’s just having that idea, just thinking of ‘How can I make it better?’ Believing in your product, being creative, thinking ahead, being positive... It’s really setting the trend, staying ahead of the curve.”

Like all great entrepreneurs, this is something Zeman has always excelled at. Put simply, he sees opportunity where most others do not, and it’s an instinct that has brought him enormous success. But, he insists, that’s only half the story. “It’s not all about money, to me anyway. It’s really about making things easier for people. Most people have stressful lives, whether it’s family, whether it’s their job, the city... So if you can bring some happiness to people, that’s the best reward,” he says, before a thoughtful pause. “People stop me in the street and want to take a picture with me and say thank you.” Zeman smiles as he gestures with his outstretched palms. “Money can’t buy that.” ■

**BUILDING JOY
CLOCKWISE**

FROM ABOVE
Andara Resort & Villas in Phuket, where Zeman also has a home; Lan Kwai Fong Chengdu; an artist’s impression of the New California Tower, which is slated to open in late 2013

**PARK LIFE
CLOCKWISE**

FROM TOP LEFT
Zeman launches Ocean Park’s Polar Adventure with Andy Lau; in costume to promote the Old Hong Kong attraction; Zeman says the park is committed to bringing animals and people closer together