

A Tradition Continued

AS THE PENINSULA CELEBRATES ITS 85TH ANNIVERSARY, **ELAINE MARDEN** TELLS PAUL KAY HOW THE HOTEL HELPED SHAPE HER CHILDHOOD, AND HOW SHE DREW ON THOSE MEMORIES TO MAKE HER LATEST FILM

PORTRAITS BY CHRIS SORENSEN





A BASTION OF REFINEMENT AND GOOD TASTE for more than eight decades, The Peninsula Hong Kong is linked inextricably with the story of Hong Kong. And, on the occasion of its 85th anniversary, it's hard to imagine anyone better qualified to encapsulate that story than Elaine Marden. The veteran filmmaker and self-professed "Kowloon girl", who was tasked by Michael Kadoorie with making a film to commemorate his hotel group's latest milestone, has a deep association with The Peninsula stretching back to her childhood.

It was in *The Peninsula's* lobby that Marden saw her first bona fide Hollywood star – the legendary *Steve McQueen*

When we meet, appropriately enough in one of the hotel's plush harbour-view suites, it's hard not to draw comparisons between Marden and The Peninsula. Both are elegant, gracious and effortlessly stylish, and if The Pen could talk, it's easy to imagine it being as engaging and eloquent as Marden. Most importantly, however, both have wonderful stories to tell, and it's not long before Marden is taking me on a richly detailed journey back in time that glides through the years as smoothly as one of The Pen's famous fleet of Rolls-Royce cars.

Marden's family, the Forsgates, had long been good friends with the Kadoories, and growing up she would call Lawrence Kadoorie and his wife Muriel "aunt and uncle". She talks with great affection about Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie, and says that some of her earliest memories involved daytrips to the Kadoorie farm and botanical gardens in the New Territories. But it is the family visits to The Peninsula that hold a special place in her heart.

"It was always a treat," she says. "When I went away to boarding school when I was 11 or 12, our first family lunch when I came back was always at The Verandah – it's where I learned to eat steak tartare – and it became a family ritual every holiday and on special occasions."

As the young Marden grew up, The Peninsula remained a constant presence in her life. "I've never forgotten my very first dinner at Gaddi's," she says. "I was about 14, and my parents were tremendous dancers, so we all had to dance. We would go to these ghastly cotillions over in the old Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank building where my brother and I had to learn to do the foxtrot and the quickstep and the cha-cha, just so that when our dinner happened at Gaddi's he could dance with mummy and I could dance with my father."

Marden would return to Gaddi's many times with her husband, shipping magnate Anto Marden, and says that it was the only place she would go for dinner on her birthday if she happened to be in Hong Kong. Before she settled down, however, The Peninsula provided the teenage Marden with more opportunities to make use of her dancing shoes.

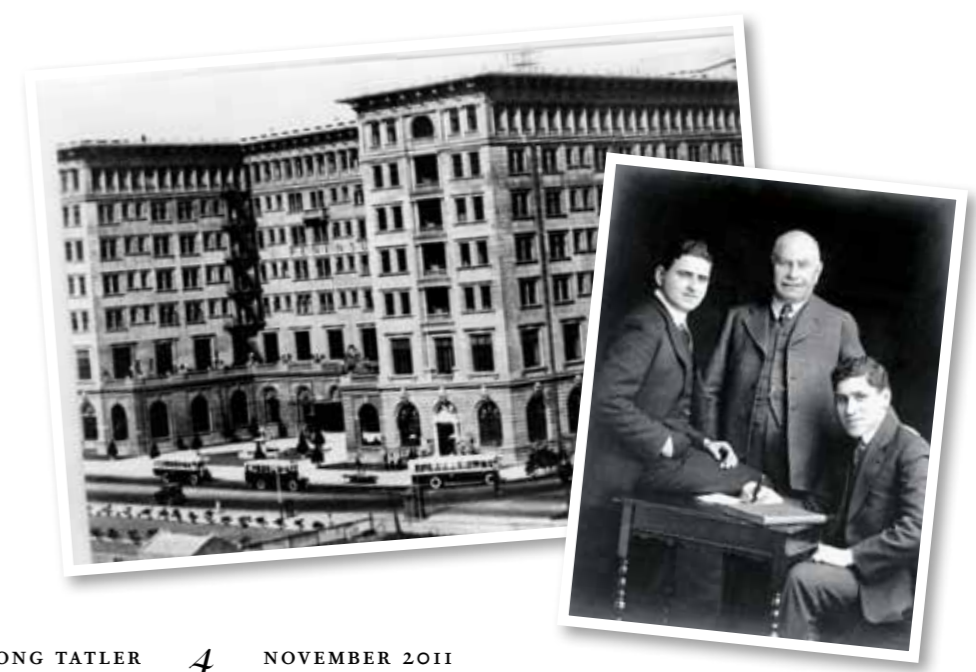
"Sir Michael Kadoorie started the first disco in Hong Kong, The Scene, which was in the basement," she recalls, "and I remember it really set the pulse for the younger set. As soon as I was old enough to be allowed in – although, in fact, I'm sure I snuck in way before the official age of 18 – we all used to dance our socks off. And it was fabulous."

As Hong Kong proved an attractive setting for a series of Hollywood films in the 1950s and '60s, the hotel played host to a string of famous faces, from Clark Gable to William Holden, and it was in The Peninsula's lobby that Marden saw her first bona fide Hollywood star – the legendary Steve McQueen, with whom she says she was thoroughly smitten.

Later, when Marden's own career began to blossom, it seemed only fitting that The Peninsula should play a starring role. Marden started her career as a presenter on TVB, being something of a rarity at the time in that she was a Caucasian who could speak Cantonese. Keen to make the move behind the camera, she found an astute mentor in TC Wang, founder of Salon Films, and marked her first major film production with the Italian crime caper *Piedone a Orienta* (aka *Flatfoot in Hong Kong*), which was released in 1975. Soon after, she worked on an American movie, *Golden Needles*, starring Joe Don Baker, Ann Sothern and

GIRL ON FILM OPENING

SPREAD Elaine Marden on the Minstrel Gallery that overlooks The Peninsula's iconic lobby
THIS SPREAD, FROM FAR LEFT Marden (far right in picture) with director of photography Brian McDairmant and writer-director Libby Halliday Palin; The Peninsula in 1928; Sir Ellis Kadoorie with his sons Lawrence and Horace





Life Through a Lens

MAKING HISTORY

FROM TOP The *Tradition Well Served: A Sequel* production team of (pictured from left) Su Mae Khoo (sound), Marden, McDairmant, Halliday Palin and Bessie Du, (production manager); Marden on set at The Peninsula with Michael Kadoorie and his daughter Bettina

In a career spanning four decades, Elaine Marden has chronicled some of Hong Kong's most cherished and important institutions in her films. *The History of China Light & Power* tells the story of the titular energy company, of which Michael Kadoorie is chairman, while she charted the philanthropic traditions of brothers Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie and their Agricultural Aid Association in the documentary *A Partnership with the People*. She also completed a production for The Hong Kong Jockey Club called *Hong Kong Racing: A Way of Life*, as well as the two *Tradition Well Served* films. But arguably her most important work is *The Hong Kong Story*, a film created to coincide with the 1997 handover, and which is perhaps the definitive social history of Hong Kong. It is certainly Marden's most widely viewed work, having been sold to Discovery and shown in more than 40 countries. It clearly all made an impression on her own brood: the second eldest of her three daughters, Isabel, is also a budding filmmaker.



Elizabeth Ashley. In need of a setting for the film's climactic scene, Marden turned to The Peninsula.

"It took me quite a bit of persuasion to see if I could borrow the Marco Polo suite in those days," she says. "It was the scene where the baddie gets shot, but unfortunately we spilled an entire bottle of mecuricome, which is blood red, all over the beautiful white carpet. So, with great trepidation, I went to apologise, and I have to say that Sir Horace [Kadoorie] had a very good sense of humour, and was very kind and said, 'Well, actually, I think that carpet needed to be changed anyway.' But it was a long time before the Hong Kong & Shanghai Hotels allowed The Peninsula to be used in another film."

While this minor mishap may have made the Kadoories think twice about allowing film crews to shoot at The Pen, it certainly didn't put them off working with Marden, who would go on to make films about China Light & Power and the philanthropic Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association before being asked to make a documentary about The Peninsula to mark the opening of the hotel's new tower in 1994. For that film, which was ultimately titled *Tradition Well Served*, Marden was given access to the hotel's archives, and she mined the past once again for the new film, which is fittingly called *Tradition Well Served: A Sequel*.

The new film not only features more magical moments from The Peninsula Hong Kong's illustrious history, but also footage of the company's other eight hotels around the world. In Bangkok, Marden chose to focus on the Loi Krathong festival, in which people create colourful offerings to set adrift on the river, while in Manila she was able to use classic footage of the first landing of the Pan-Am clipper being greeted by President Manuel L. Quezon. And in Hong Kong, one of the highlights is a meeting between Lawrence Kadoorie and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. "We have archive of [them] laughing



Marden was very hands on as a producer and had *a singular vision for her team*

at each other's old age, which is very sweet," says Marden. "There's an iconic picture of the two big armchairs with a spittoon in the middle, and Deng Xiaoping showing off to Lord Kadoorie that he's actually six years younger than him. I think it's touches like that that give the film the same magic that the previous film had."

But the new film is much more than just archive footage, and Marden and her crew travelled around the world to shoot at all The Peninsula's properties – in New York, Chicago, Beverly Hills, Tokyo, Manila, Bangkok, Shanghai, Beijing and soon-to-open Paris – during a process that took about two years to complete. She was also able to call on Michael Kadoorie to appear in the production, and the film opens with the tycoon cruising along the Huangpu River in Shanghai, and reminiscing about his first trips to the city as a young child.

The genesis of the film, says Marden, was very much a collaborative creation between herself and Kadoorie, but the execution owed a debt of gratitude to her team, which included writer-director Libby Halliday Palin, director of photography Brian McDairmant and others, and about whose contribution Marden is effusive.

On set for more than 90 per cent of the shoots, Marden was very much hands on as producer, and had a singular vision that she communicated to her team with a slightly unusual brief. She asked them to imagine a couple from Idaho in the American Mid-West, a prominent lawyer called Harry and his wife Laverne, who travel to Chicago and stay at The Peninsula. "Harry is there to attend an important meeting," she explains, "and while he is out, Laverne is in the room in between going out and meeting for functions. And she watches the film, and she's absolutely bowled over by, let's say Tokyo, because we deal with the tradition of the cherry blossom, or perhaps the wonderful tradition of Loi Krathong in Bangkok. And when Harry comes in after his meeting, the first thing he hears from Laverne is, 'Hey honey, we're going to Bangkok.'"

Inspiring the present through the traditions of the past is, it seems, at the heart of the film – and at the heart of The Peninsula. "If it's a subliminal sell of the brand, that's marvellous," says Marden, "but if it's a history lesson, that's even better." ■

Tradition Well Served: A Sequel premieres at The Peninsula Hong Kong on November 28.

MOVIE MOGUL

ABOVE Marden, in The Peninsula's Salon de Ning is on the board of trustees for World Wildlife Fund Hong Kong. She has three daughters, Zoe, Isabel and Clio