



Wonho Chung with Faisal Al Omairi in *Saq Al Bamboo*.

Wonho treads cultural lines

In 'Saq Al Bamboo', the Korean-Vietnamese comedian plays a Filipino-Kuwaiti trying to make sense of his roots

By **Marwa Hamad**,
Staff Reporter

When Wonho Chung took on the role of Filipino-Kuwaiti character Eisa Al Tarrouf in the Ramadan drama *Saq Al Bamboo* (*Bamboo Stalk*), he knew there would be backlash.

As a Korean-Vietnamese stand-up comedian who was raised in Jordan, Chung belonged neither to Kuwait nor the Philippines. He didn't even belong to the world of TV drama.

If anything, he was more comfortable on stage, in front of a live audience, making people laugh; he was best known for his flawless handle on colloquial Arabic, at odds with his East Asian features.

But could he take on a new identity? A new genre?

The producers of *Saq Al Bamboo*, based on the award-winning 2013 eponymous novel by Saud Al Sanousi, certainly thought so. Chung was chosen to play the central character, Eisa Al Tarrouf, also known as Jose Mendoza, the son of a Filipina maid and her Kuwaiti husband, who was kept a secret.

"I was concerned that the Filipinos might say, 'Oh, why didn't you hire a Filipino for this role? Why would you go and hire a Korean guy?' But what people don't realise is that it was very hard to find that one person who looks Asian, for the believability of the work, and at the same time speaks Arabic," Chung told *tabloid!*. YouTube comments on the trailer have indeed questioned his casting.

His character speaks Arabic with difficulty, but in person, Chung is a natural. This helped him on set, as 90 per cent of the production crew didn't speak English. ("If you don't speak Arabic, you won't be able to do your work properly. You'd need a translator for everything," he said.)

The series introduces us to Josephine, who moves from the Philippines to Kuwait to work as a maid for a rich, influential family. She marries Rashid, the only son of the household, in secret. Josephine gives birth to their son, Jose, but Rashid abandons her and sends the boy to the Philippines.

As an adult, Jose returns to Kuwait to meet the Arab side of his family.

"He's a young man who is lost be-

tween two worlds — two identities, two religions, two families. He's trying to find his way," said Chung.

"There are a lot of challenges having Eisa or Jose move back to Kuwait, and trying to meet with his Kuwaiti family. He came back with the most genuine intentions. He came back with a lot of love, only to realise that his family are completely embarrassed by his presence

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WONHO CHUNG | Actor

within them.

"They try to accept him, but they're stuck in this dilemma of, 'He is our son, but what will the people say? How will this affect our social status, our family name?'"

The series taps into issues of Islam,



Souad Abdullah, who plays Ghanima, the matriarch of the family, in *Saq Al Bamboo*.



Wonho Chung (left) filming with Farah Al Saraf for the show.

Photos courtesy of MBC

family who happens to be Kuwaiti, and how they deal with their maid. You have people in the UAE who treat their hired help very well or very bad. This happens everywhere," said Chung.

Dubai stood in for Kuwait, which delayed the production by two months.

"We were really racing against time to deliver the episodes before Ramadan started, and in fact, we were still filming during Ramadan. We just wrapped up 10 or 12 days ago," said Chung.

For Chung, it was tough to play a character who faced verbal, emotional and physical abuse on a daily basis. In addition to speaking English and Arabic, he also had to learn Tagalog, which made up more than 20 per cent of his dialogue.

"It's so hard to learn a language you don't know, let alone act in that language and sound believable — you need to sound Filipino, you cannot sound like a Filipino with an accent," he said.

But the effort paid off. The project, with its big budget and household names, such as actress Souad Abdulla, took on the urgency of a passion project, fuelled by the cast and crew's willingness to put their lives on hold for three-and-a-half months.

GRUELLING SHOOTS

The shortest day on set was 12 hours long, and during the final stretch of filming, the crew went 72 hours straight, sleeping on set.

"We were shooting anywhere from 15 to 40 scenes a day, which is, if you ask anyone who works in the film industry, absolute insanity," said Chung. "Sometimes you would lose your mind."

But sometimes someone would have a break from filming and they would go on a grocery run so they could cook for everyone on set, or they would buy mattresses and blankets for those who didn't have the luxury of going home.

"I think without this wonderful cast we wouldn't have survived. There were days when we were filming in May, in Dubai, outside in the 45 degree heat with humidity, wearing winter clothes. The coolest day was 40 degrees. We were dying — some days we were under the sun all day."

Emotions came to a head when Chung first saw himself on television; he remembers how he couldn't stop crying as he watched the first two episodes.

"The storyline is sad, but also, every scene, every actor I see, I know how much we worked behind the scenes," he said. "And now, to see that we're entering the last ten days of Ramadan, and since day one, we have been the leading drama series is really, really, really rewarding."

Christianity, and Buddhism, as well as the separation of socioeconomic classes. It also deals with the topic of bidouns, people in Kuwait who were born and raised there, but have no passports and are thus considered stateless persons by the government.

"It's a very tricky subject matter to tackle, which the writer has done very elegantly. For us, we tried to, hopefully, follow suit in the series," said Chung.

RED TAPE

In Chung's opinion, the main subject matter, which is the mistreatment of foreign workers and hired help in the region, is one that should have been raised earlier.

"As you know, there are some red lines in our side of the world. We don't have the liberty of speech that other countries have. We faced a lot of problems bringing this series to life," he said.

For starters, the crew were refused permission to film in Kuwait. There was a fear that Kuwaitis would be painted as a racist people, despite the fact that Al Tarrouf was a fictitious family name.

"It's a case study of this one particular

Don't miss it!

Saq Al Bamboo airs on Shahid.net, starzplay.com and on MBC Drama at 4pm daily.