

# 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33

# Asian Film Professionals

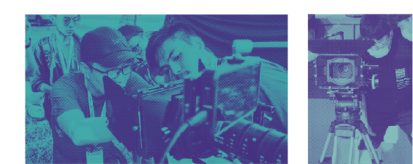
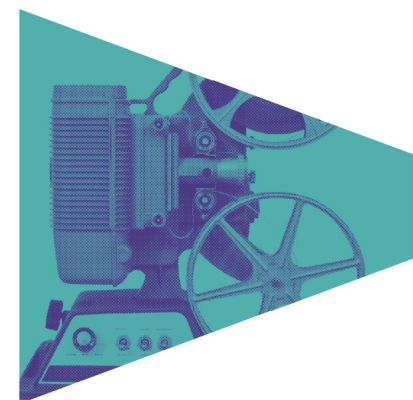




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# PREFACE

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The Busan Asian Film School (AFiS) launched the first session of its International Film Business Academy in 2017. Its primary goal is to provide opportunities for filmmakers throughout Asia to study film producing in a structured, in-depth manner. Given that many countries in the region do not have formal programs where filmmakers can study producing, the founders of AFiS felt it was important to address this gap and foster the development of talented, internationally-minded producers.

The fact that AFiS fellows come from a wide range of different countries and backgrounds also mean that graduates can tap into a strong regional network of filmmaking colleagues. This network of AFiS graduates is formally structured as the New Asian Producers Network (NAPNet).

We at AFiS are well aware of the leading role that producers played in the Korean film industry's own development and transformation at the end of the 20th century. Even more so than directors, actors or other figures in the industry, producers are ideally situated to address industry-wide problems and push for needed policy reforms. One of the other goals that drive AFiS is the belief that our graduates will slowly but surely push for reforms in their own industries in the coming decades.

There are many subjects that we teach at AFiS, ranging from financing and storytelling to film law and the history of Asian cinema. We train our fellows to be more effective at pitching, and mentor them in developing their own projects over the course of the program. But we are also well aware that the one thing we can't teach our fellows directly is experience.

In the end, it is experience that makes a producer. Experience must be lived and cannot be taught. Nonetheless it is true that those who listen closely and learn from the experiences of others can not only increase their understanding of how the film industry works, but can also put themselves in a position to make better, wiser decisions in their own careers.

In that sense the professionals interviewed in this book, each of whom have shared their experiences and thoughts in conversations with our fellows, have imparted to us all something quite precious. The experience and insight contained within these pages are a valuable resource that we hope will be helpful to anyone with a deep interest in filmmaking and Asian cinema.

We are proud to have so many famous names included among the interviewees in this book – figures who have played crucial, irreplaceable roles in the development of their nation's film industries. At the same time, we are just as proud to include the perspectives of those whose names readers might not recognize, but whose contributions have been similarly important: professionals working in the fields of distribution, exhibition, marketing, worker's rights, festival programming and more.

We hope that this book will be distributed widely, so that more prospective filmmakers and film industry professionals can benefit from the collective wisdom of these interviews. In editing this volume I have been deeply impressed by the passion and commitment expressed by these filmmakers. The countries and film industries covered in this book are highly diverse, but the common thread that ties all of these interviews together is a deep and genuine love of cinema.

Thank you to all the fellows of the 2022 International Film Business Academy, the interviewees, the staff at AFiS, the Busan Film Commission and the City of Busan for making this book a reality.

**Darcy Paquet**

International Film Business Academy, Busan Asian Film School



# RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN

Filmmaker / Writer / Researcher

Bangladesh

Interview by Md. Hasibur Rahman Shakil

Rubaiyat Hossain is a filmmaker, writer, and interdisciplinary researcher. She completed her B.A. in Women Studies at Smith College, USA, and an M.A. in South Asian Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Her primary fields of interest are Sufism, Bengali nationalism, the formation of Bengali modernity, and its correlation with female sexuality. Rubaiyat Hossain has worked for prominent women's rights NGOs in Bangladesh such as Ain O Shalish Kendra and Naripokkho. She has worked as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Economics and Social Sciences at BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh since 2006. Rubaiyat is one of Bangladesh's handful of established female filmmakers, known for her debut feature film *Meherjaan* (2011) which faced political and cultural wrath in Bangladesh for its anti-war narrative, and its criticism of masculine nationalism from a feminine point of view. Her second feature film *Under Construction* (2015) premiered at New Directors Showcase at the Seattle International Film festival and was theatrically released and well-received in Bangladesh. Her third feature film *Made in Bangladesh* (2019), premiered at Toronto International Film Festival and was distributed by Pyramide Films. Rubaiyat uses a feminist lens to deconstruct the otherwise phallogocentric institution of cinema. Currently, she lives between Dhaka and New York making films and attending the Tisch School of Arts at New York University in Cinema Studies.

**Hasib Shakil**

*What is the story behind your filmmaking career? Why did you want to be a filmmaker?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

From my childhood, I wanted to do something creative. I can still remember when I was around 6 years old my mother used to take me to Charukola (Department of Fine Arts, Dhaka University). There was a morning class of painting which I attended. So, from childhood, I was interested in visual arts. But as it was not common in our society, back then I never thought I would be a filmmaker. Back then films that I got exposed to were from Indian cinemas like *Silsila*, *Umrao Jaan*, etc. These films never got me into the thinking that I will be a filmmaker too. However, I used to read a lot of books as well. I was in class four when I first read *Baksho Rohossyo* by Satyajit Ray. Then I read his other books as well like *Feluda* and the *Professor Shonku* series. The day Satyajit died I got to know he was a filmmaker as well. Isn't that strange that I had no idea that my favorite writer was a filmmaker too? After that, I watched *Pather Panchali* and that was the first cinema that got me by my nerve. That was the first day I was like, "Wow this is cinema". It was an art that gave social commentary and I was very much attracted to that. When I was 18-19 years old, I found a book by Satyajit called *Bisoy Chalachitro* and it had many technical lessons about films, and as well there were topics about the French New Wave. That book made me think that I maybe want to be a filmmaker.

**Hasib Shakil**

*How did you start your journey as a filmmaker?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

When I was doing my undergraduate studies in America, our college's library had all of the films by Satyajit Ray and I watched them all one by one. I watched each film multiple times and tried to learn filmmaking's details from them. Also at that time, I had taken the course "South Asian Visual Culture". Though it was not about movies but about how South Asian visuals are. I watched *Raja Harish Chandra* and read *Ways of Seeing* at that time and understood that visuals are also political. My undergrad was in Liberal Arts and Women Studies and I also did many courses in Theatre Studies. And in my final year, I did a course on Video Production.

Then I did an intensive program at New York Film Academy and we got to make short films in 16mm. There I learned how to light in 16mm filming, how to use a light meter, how sound design works, how to edit in FCP etc. So overall I got all the technical knowledge about filmmaking. Even then it was taken as a hobby by my family. No one then considered filmmaking as a career for me. I actually lied to my family saying that I was going to do a summer course at Harvard University and got into New York Film Academy's intensive program. As the cinema environment of Bangladesh at that time was very anti-social and vulgar, my family completely freaked out at first when they got to know I wanted to be a filmmaker. Anyways, I continued. As I was saying it was unthinkable for my family that I wanted to be a filmmaker. I graduated in 2002 and I had my own camera and started shooting and editing short films. In 2005 my short films got into Dhaka International Film Festival, New York, and Las Vegas.

**Hasib Shakil**

*Well that actually leads us to the second question. The 70s and 80s were the golden eras of Bangladeshi cinema. However, by the late 90s the Bangladeshi film industry began to copy Indian cinema and lost its originality. Also, the vulgar elements poured into films and thus cinema lost its family audiences. You made your first film Meherjaan in 2011 when the industry was at stake. So, what were the challenges for you?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

I didn't know if I could make a film or not. You know it's a huge process. But as I had a lot of passion for filmmaking, I determined no matter what I will make this one film, at least to know if I can make films or not. And also, I had this confidence that through *Meherjaan* I can make a different film than what was going on in cinemas in that day. A film that anyone can watch, I mean a film without vulgar sellable content. And I wanted to do something unconventional. A different aspect that no one else was showing, a different story that no one else was saying.

To make *Meherjaan* I went to BFDC (Bangladesh Film Development Corporation) and got listed as a director. It was different than nowadays. Modumita Movies helped me back then. They gave me their production manager for my film. They also wanted a rebirth of Bangladeshi cinema. So that's how I started my first film actually. Even then my family thought that I was doing one film just for the sake of my hobby and I would not make any more further.

**Hasib Shakil**

*We know that our industry is not in an appropriate structure. Especially for women filmmakers, the environment is harder. So how did you find our industry as a woman filmmaker?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

In the beginning whenever I used to go to meetings no one actually looked at me while discussing important stuff. Even though I was the director, people choose other male key people in my film to discuss. When I was at the producer's meeting at BFDC no one actually paid enough importance to me. And when I first saw my crew, I was shocked to see that there were 50-60 workers but no one was female but me. I was only 27 years old back then, and they were looking at me strangely as if they couldn't believe that I was the director. And I had to face this judgment as a female filmmaker everywhere I went. Even many actors refused to work with me as they couldn't trust my capabilities. So, the first film was very challenging. Even my DP wasn't listening to me properly.

Most importantly, there were many actors in *Meherjaan*. Very prominent actors from India like Victor Banarjee and Jaya Bacchan. So, maintaining and gaining the confidence of this number of actors was really tough. However, as I had knowledge of theatre acting and theatre studies my actors respected my style of dealing with acting enough. And every actor gave me their best. My crew also did a very good job but I had to fight a lot to establish my authority as a director. That's the reason that I had to shoot in five different phases to finish the film. I had to go home after finishing the first phase of the shoot. I had to clear my mind and come back for the second phase of shooting. That's why the film was in the production phase for a long period of time.

Plus in Bangladesh, everyone actually shuts your confidence down as a female filmmaker. I noticed that I wanted to tell a very feminine story in my first film and I couldn't get that into my crew's head. Everyone was questioning why the set had to be this pink and all. Nobody was understanding easily the context of my story, my film. And even when I was in India to do the post-production, I had to sit in the editing panels and sound studios for hours, days and night and there was no female except me. And I was very uncomfortable realizing that there was hardly any female working in the film industry.

**Hasib Shakil**

*After your first film, how have you kept up in your journey? Later have you noticed any*

**Hasib Shakil**

*better environment for women than when you started?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

In my second film *Under Construction* I started to include more female crew members in my team. And by my third film *Made in Bangladesh* most of the key people in my film were female. Because by that time I realized that if I want to make a change for myself and other females in our industry, then I have to bring other females into leadership positions. Because when there are more women participating in leadership positions in a film, the whole crew gets a new environment and the mentality of the whole crew is also changed. When the rest of the crew notices that the DP, Sound Designer, Production Designer, etc. head of departments are female their perspective gets changed.

Most importantly as I work with female actors mostly, having more key female people in the team makes them comfortable. That's why I believe they can act so deliberately in my films. I have been working for the last twelve years in feature films and I guess it took me this amount of time to finally realize as a woman how can I work comfortably. I also work with many male key persons as well who are sensible enough. It's not like I only work with females. But taking enough female heads of the departments actually helps me to create a balance and a good environment for shooting. Like if you see photos of last year's Cannes where our film *Rehana* was screened, you will notice that in *Rehana*'s team Badhon is the only female person. This lack of female participants creates an imbalance. I want to change this structure.

**Hasib Shakil**

*You have initiated "Sultana's Dream Workshop" for mentoring female filmmakers in Bangladesh. Do you believe that in the future, the Bangladeshi film industry will be a better place for women filmmakers and create enough opportunities for them?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain**

As I faced many challenges as a woman while starting my filmmaking career as well as continuing afterward, I realized that only women can make places for women. Like the first voting rights or the right to education for women in Bangladesh, it has to be women to march together to come out of age. Sultana's Dream Workshop is an initiative to train and create more female filmmakers in Bangladesh. For this workshop, there are many women instructors who voluntarily teach here as well. I believe as women we all feel the urge that we need to make more women come into our industry.

However, I believe it will be a harder road for women in Bangladesh, especially in filmmaking. For example, nowadays there are many new OTT platforms in Bangladesh. At least in the last two years, they are releasing many OTT contents one after another. Though it's hard to finance your film in Bangladesh, these OTT platforms are financing filmmakers and production houses. Many new filmmakers are making content. Which is praiseworthy. Unfortunately, no female filmmakers are being given the opportunity yet to make a film or web series. Many young male directors are given chances, yet females who are experienced and good directors as well haven't been seen to direct an original OTT project. This indicates that the industry doesn't overall want to bring out more female filmmakers from Bangladesh.

But I did notice in Bangladesh there are female documentary filmmakers who are prominent and doing comfortably better. This happens maybe for the reason that documentary is a more independent work, wherein in feature films as a female director

**Rubaiyat Hossain** you need to be the only female key member within your crew in Bangladesh. So yes, it will be hard for female filmmakers to occupy a fruitful position in our industry, though the scenario is quite better than when we started. In Bangladesh, women need to fight twice as hard as others. However, we hope for a better future to emerge.

**Hasib Shakil** *Is this a matter of Bangladesh only that the female filmmakers are not given enough opportunities?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain** I have this poster of *Titane* in my room. I love this film. This film represented women's bodies in such a different way. Julia became the second woman in the 74 years of Canne's history to win a Palme d'Or. But unfortunately, I have noticed even in France people are not appreciating her enough, even questioning her winning. I reckon it is not only Bangladesh but the movie industry from the beginning of time. I mean the history of cinema always represented women in an objective manner, not in a subjective manner. As I was saying to be a woman filmmaker one needs to struggle twice as hard. Not only as females but as any minority.

Let's think beyond borders. A devious film like *The Birth of a Nation* was history's biggest hit at the beginning. From that era on, filmmakers of black skin had to struggle twice as hard to be able to make films like *Moonlight* or *Get Out*. As a brown filmmaker, you will have to work twice as hard too because you are a minority in the world of film. So, imagine it for a black female filmmaker, she has to try four times harder than anyone to achieve the same position. For any minority, the film industry is a place with a lack of opportunities, as the struggle is double. If the industry had proper opportunities there would have been transgender filmmakers in Bangladesh by this time.

**Hasib Shakil** *What do you think about co-producing opportunities?  
And how this can help the growth of our industry?*

**Rubaiyat Hossain** Bangladesh has a lot of stories yet to tell, and the emerging filmmakers from Bangladesh are on their way to crafting good stories. Co-producing surely opens up many doors to bring our cinema to the world. Even before a film is made and distributed, co-producing helps you to take your story, your idea beyond borders. Even your fellowship that you are doing with Busan Asian Film School will at least take your stories to your classmates, teachers, mentors, etc. who are from different parts of Asia. Also, not just telling our own story, but understanding others' stories too.

We had previously some films that were made as Indian-Bangladeshi co-productions. When two or more countries collaborate through films there is a cultural and economical collaboration that happens too. Nowadays Bangladeshi producers like Arifur [Rahman] and Bijon [Imtiaz] are producing films from Afghanistan. It's not only telling our story but understanding and appreciating others' stories too. As Bangladesh doesn't have enough public grants, international co-producing is a very fruitful way to get the finances done. Also, in order to market and distribute our films in Europe, Southeast Asia, North America, etc., co-producing can be really helpful.

- May 18, 2022

**by Md. Hasibur Rahman Shakil (screen name: Hasib Shakil, hasib.shakil15@gmail.com)** is a producer, writer, and director from Bangladesh. With a passion for cinema from early childhood, Shakil started making independent short films in 2013. In 2014 his short film *A Reflection* was selected at International Inter-University Short Film Festivals by Dhaka University. In 2016, he started working as an Assistant Director under a famous video commercial director in Bangladesh. He started directing and producing content in 2017. These were all happening when he was still doing undergraduate studies. After graduation, he founded a video creative and production agency in 2018 called HASH. For almost the last four years Shakil is leading his team HASH as a CEO. Moreover, Shakil started teaching Script Writing and Film Production at BRAC University Residential Semester. As student projects, Shakil produced 8 short films in four semesters of teaching this course. These short films got into many local short film festivals in 2018, 2019, and 2020. To enhance his journey in filmmaking, he enrolled in the International Film Business School of Busan Asian Film School in 2022. He is selected as the only Bangladeshi fellow this year and he developed a feature film *She Lost a Red Balloon* in IFBA. Also, as a producer, he is developing two feature documentaries as well. Hasib Shakil emulates his dream of making films and filmmakers, and helps to convey our culture to the world and enrich our economy through films.



# MUHAMMAD FARID AZLAN

## B. ABD. GHANI

Filmmaker / Manager

Broadcasting Development / Division AITI

Brunei Darussalam

Interview by Hjh Amal Nabilah Bte Hj Jumat

Farid Azlan Ghani is a Malaysian-born filmmaker who has built his reputation in Brunei through various film endeavours over the last 20 years. He is a Malaysia Film Academy graduate (1997), and has been actively producing, directing, editing and writing film, TV and theatre productions since then. His film, *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* (2013) won the Special Jury Award and was nominated for Best Picture-Comedy at Asean International Film Award AIFFA (2013).

From 2014 until 2022, he was also the Manager for the Broadcasting Development Division of Authority for Information Technology Industry (AITI), Brunei Darussalam. Under his leadership, he managed various local collaborations, namely, Young Content Maker Shortlab initiative, Pitch and Produce Initiative, RTB Reel: Cerita Kitani Initiative, and recently the Brunei Content Festival, which took place in June 2022.

### H. Amal Nabilah

*Let's start with a brief introduction about yourself and then perhaps you can talk about what inspired you to enter the film industry in the beginning, and coming to Brunei?*

### Farid Azlan Ghani

I am a producer, director, scriptwriter, editor, singer and aspiring comedian. Since a long time ago, when I was still a little kid, normally on TV, you could easily find P. Ramlee films being screened, and watching it with my family, they were easy to enjoy. At that time, I always wondered, "Wow, that's magical! How can they do that?". But at that time, we lived in a village area, so nobody really knew the answer aside from, "Well, that's filmmaking". Then the strongest memory was when I was 10 years old, I remember playing a game at night, and my father called me to follow him somewhere. He didn't want to disclose where we were going, just asked me to follow obediently. He actually brought me for the first time to a real cinema to watch *James Bond*. I can't recall whether it was *Thunderball* or *Diamonds Are Forever*, but what I remember strongly was that it was my first time watching a movie on a big screen in a cinema. Starting from there, I realised I want to do what is being done to get that movie on that screen. But at the time, the knowledge of it is still out of reach for me and my environment, because movies simply existed for people to enjoy, nothing else.

As I grew into a teenager, everyone wanted to be a rock star at that time, and I was contemplating the same or to become a football player as I was active in sports. But after I finished SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education), I decided to join my aunt in Kuala Lumpur who owns a theatre company, and started working there. After that, I enrolled in the School of Engineering, because at that time I still was not aware about Filmmaking. After I graduated, I found a job as a junior engineer under a studio that belonged to the late music composer, Pak Ngah. There, I was more of a caretaker than an engineer. One day, he asked me to send a document to FINAS, which led me to finding a pamphlet on Film Academy Malaysia (FAM). It reminded me of what I initially wanted to do for the longest time, and so I went back to the office, talked to the staff about it, and told them about my passion for learning about film. At that time, Pak Ngah also wanted to send me off to Singapore to take a course on theatre, at LASALLE College of the Arts. He wanted me to graduate from there, and help him operate later at Istana Budaya. But my heart was more into filmmaking, so I talked to my Aunt and she recommended me to join FAM because she will be one of the lecturers there as well, and so I decided to enrol there.

### H. Amal Nabilah

*After you enrolled in the academy, which role interested you more?*

### Farid Azlan Ghani

During the interview before I enrolled, I always knew that I like telling/creating stories, so that cuts it down to either scriptwriting or directing. But as they interviewed me, my answer was "I want to manage film", and that surprised the interviewer because they said people don't usually come here wanting to manage films. I said, I know that many people would want to be scriptwriters or directors, and we will be taught how to do these things eventually, so my end goal is I want to manage films. They explained that what I want is more towards being a producer. One of the interviewers at the time was Othman Hafsham, a Malaysian filmmaker. Throughout the course, I ended up learning more about becoming a director and scriptwriter. At the time, my understanding was that if you write the script, you must direct it too. Because what I learned from Martin Scorsese, even though he has his own scriptwriters, he still does most of the scriptwriting and directing still. So I believed that a director who can write his own story, can direct it better because

**Farid Azlan Ghani** you understand more of the story than anyone else.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *After learning about this, do you think that the journey (enrolling into a film institution), played an essential role in you becoming the filmmaker you are now?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** Yes, but in those years we were still shooting in 35mm or 16mm. That is a different skill that you must learn as the editing at that time was done on the traditional steam bag, and we used separate audio and video tapes, even for transitions or video effects. It's very different from nowadays where you can simply drag and drop. Back then, after you shoot a film, you go to the lab and get the negative to print the positive for you to do your editing, matching the audio, dissolve marking and so forth. It's a skill that you had to learn at school, since there was no internet at the time. You could read from books but it was hard to understand. At that time, if you wanted to be a filmmaker, you had to go to a proper film school.

Now, if you really have passion, I believe film school is an essential for you to become a lecturer or film critic, or if you want to write books on filmmaking. But the technology is now simple; you don't really have to go to film school. You need to film every day, watch YouTube videos on how to make films as much as you can, and be proactive in joining film workshops. Because filmmaking nowadays is simpler. People can use their phone or DSLR to make films. If you specifically aim to be a Director of Photography, then there's a different skill set that you have to go to school to learn the basics and fundamentals. But if you just want to be a filmmaker in general, you should focus on practising and finding the right guidance— but basically, you can start by learning from YouTube.

My son is into filmmaking. He learned to edit, operate cameras and sound by himself, so my advice to him was to keep producing content, and try to compare with any other content that you watch on YouTube, but don't go to film school yet. Instead, go learn another skill or try other things too, for example, become a business administrator or learn about marketing, get a degree in finance or any business-related area. Maybe after you get a degree in that, and still learn filmmaking, then you perhaps could join a production crew to learn the process hands on, or join a film school.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *Nowadays, it usually takes time for graduates to find a job after graduating. Was it the same situation for you back then?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** Right. The thing about FAM is it's under National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS). They have a studio where commercial shoots are done, so all filmmakers gather there for film matters. There's also a cafe where filmmakers can network with each other. We were very fortunate to have enrolled in FAM because through the courses, we get to know existing filmmakers and be friends with them. Also, the thing about FAM is when we were there, none of us really thought about immediately joining a film company after graduating: we all aimed to freelance. For example, if there's a director who plans to shoot for two months, we aimed to be part of the crew. Or if there was a commercial happening soon, we wanted to be part of that crew too. So essentially, it wasn't that hard to get jobs at the time.

I remember during an attachment, most of my friends went to big studios, while I was

**Farid Azlan Ghani** fortunate enough to join a maestro and the great director, U-Wei Haji Saari. He wanted to shoot a film titled *Jogho* in southern Thailand, a project sponsored by NHK at the time. So we all simply did our attachment by joining such productions. Fortunately at the time, the shooting was delayed because one of the main cast couldn't make it, and I became the replacement. Thanks to networking, getting jobs was quite easy.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *How did you end up coming to Brunei after that?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** At that time it was around 1999, and I was about to join Epic Express as a junior cameraman. But due to the economic downturn everything was held up. My wife got a job offer in Brunei, so I followed her here, and at the same time I went around asking for any openings in making content for television. Due to my ability in a lot of areas in production, it was easy for me to join local production companies here and there, including giving consultation for companies who were just about to start their business. At the time, the digital world was just starting. Final Cut Pro 3 was a very new thing to everybody, so I learnt that from somebody here. With my basic knowledge in filmmaking, editing came quite easy to me and then I started to help a few companies as an editor. When someone wanted to procure new equipment, I would also help to consult on what kind of equipment to get.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *With all that happening, how did you balance your passion for filmmaking while doing everything else?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** I still kept in contact with all my friends who were actively doing filmmaking in Malaysia, but I kept on writing down any ideas I had at the time, in hopes that I would find the time and resources to film it in Brunei later on. I remember one particular day: I had this comedy script prepared, and I was hoping that this script could be shot using 16mm. I had a friend from University Malaysia in Sarawak, and the university had the equipment I wanted, so we discussed the possibility of filming on 16mm. Until one day the owner of Regalblue Production, Harlif Hj Mohammad who during that time was in discussions with the Ministry, asked me if it would be possible to shoot on film. I confirmed with him that it is possible, or we can always do it on digital. We did some research together after that, and found out the nearest place to process a 16mm film at the time was in Australia. With that knowledge, we decided not to proceed with shooting on film.

And then I remember a good friend of mine, Raja Mukhriz, a Malaysian filmmaker, was shooting a film using an HD camera (Panasonic P2). Another friend, an assistant director who was working on the film *Mukhsin* (2006) in Malaysia said they were also filming on HD camera. Harlif later suggested that we try to shoot a film on a P2 camera as well. At the time, most of the cinemas in Brunei were also changing to digital, no more 35mm. We used an old script that we had, which was *Ada Apa Dengan Rina*, and shot it on digital as a guerilla-style production. During that time, not many people knew that cinema would only accept DCP format for film, because it's a very new thing. Everyone else before this sent in 35mm. So Harlif did his own research on how to get the correct DCP output, getting help from somebody in Thailand.

Once we got the DCP ready, we met Benny Ang (Times Cineplex owner) and told him we

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

have a film to play in your cinema. He was surprised that somebody else in the country who was not in the exhibition sector knew about DCP. After we clarified that our file was not an mp4 or mpeg file, we presented our DCP file in a pendrive to him, and he accepted it. When the file was ingested properly and projected for the first time on the cinema screen during the test show, Benny turned to us asking when we wanted to start playing this film in his cinema. Now this was roughly about 35 years after the first Bruneian film, *Gema Dari Menara / Echoes from the Minaret*, played in local cinemas. Our movie was the second to portray a Bruneian story, language and actors, in a local cinema.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Since you were involved and present during that early digitalization period in Brunei, can you share with us what changes the industry was undergoing?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

Unfortunately at that time, the only two local digital movies that managed to get completed and screened in cinemas were *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* (2013) and *Yasmine* (2014). Even for *Yasmine* at the time, the production wanted to shoot it on 35mm, but they changed to digital (Red Camera). At the time, film was not hyped yet in Brunei, and there were only a few companies such as Regalblue Production and Origin Artistic. Most of the people involved in making these films had a day job working for the television network (Radio Televisyen Brunei). So from Beta tape, to digital. It was a confusing time. Some misunderstood that Digital Beta is HD, and this confusion went even up to the producers who wanted to shoot in digital. If someone produced or delivered something in HD, they would argue that it's not digital, and if you gave them a Digital beta they would confuse it as digital HD. Even the engineers were having a hard time figuring it out back then, though Brunei was actually one of the earliest ASEAN countries to adopt Digital. There was also confusion on if you shot in SD, but the export was supposed to be in HD. But on DCP, it was very quiet: only two companies successfully did it in that format. It was also due to the fact that there was no equipment yet in Brunei to convert into DCP. So actually, in that period, everyone was learning.

After those two movies were released in cinema, there was a lot of talk amongst local filmmakers who wanted to do it too, but they hadn't yet learned about DCP. They thought these two movies were given in mpeg4 and the regular format to the cinema. Here is when Benny Ang contributed a lot behind the scenes in helping the local filmmakers understand about DCP, as well as explaining why other formats do not work in the cinema. He played a big role in helping local filmmakers get accustomed to the development of cinema.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Since you mentioned how confusing that period was, do you feel that is still true or happening today in the industry?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

Knowledge wise, I think the new generation knows a lot. But demand wise, it might still be so in some aspects. Nowadays, most Bruneians are very exposed to Western films. Of course, our nature is to compare, and for sure we don't have that yet, the luxury to produce such high calibre films in Brunei. Simply put, the main problem is the mindset: they thought they were ready, but they are not ready yet. However, to compare back then to now, people are more familiar and understand how to produce cinema-worthy films.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Can you elaborate more on "they thought they were ready, but they are not ready yet"?*

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Does that refer to the ecosystem of film in Brunei, or the people?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

One thing for sure, filmmaking in Brunei is actually a borrowed culture. Probably in Europe or America, cinema and filmmaking is a culture. Bruneian culture is for example, traditional dances, which of course other countries also have, but we have practised it for a long time. But film is not our culture. Usually for a borrowed culture, it gets segmented. For example, there's a segment that believes that any films that are to be produced must be of Hollywood quality. There are other segments that feel indifferent towards filmmaking: anything to do with film is filmmaking. In this digital cross-platform era, these options still exist: you do films like Hollywood (big budget) or you can do any film to play in the cinema. Because it's not in our culture, we just keep comparing.

So when I said "we think we are ready, but we are not ready", it is with the understanding of yes, we understand the technology of filmmaking, creativity-wise we are trying to achieve that, but we fail to unite the whole ecosystem. This segmentation is also happening amongst viewers: there are open-minded viewers who simply enjoy watching anything on any platform, there are viewers who are following trending platforms only such as Netflix and OTTs, and there are viewers who choose not to watch anything less than Hollywood standard. In other countries, you can still find crowds of people who are open to watching old or classic movies in cinema for simple pleasure, as is their culture. Here, we don't have that.

Viewers also don't understand the process. The majority of the audience in Brunei still think TV and film are the same, regardless of the screening method. Their understanding is that many films after they are screened in the cinema go to TV anyway. Because of how segmented we are, the ecosystem is quite all over the place and in disarray still.

As a filmmaker you can't simply say "I only know how to make films". As a responsible filmmaker, you also need to understand the law, the rules and regulations that you are working with, the business and finance of filmmaking, the usage of intellectual property, and have a grasp on project management. You can't only be focusing on the art of filmmaking or the creative side of it. Understand that in all that we do, we are tied to law and order. In Brunei, this understanding is what's actually lacking amongst our talent. Everyone is just focused so much on production, that they overlook the laws that they potentially could be breaking or are already breaking. When you get scolded for filming something somewhere, it might be because you simply didn't ask for the right permission or permit from the right people.

To summarise it, I believe that to be a good filmmaker, not only do you need to understand your craft, but you should familiarise yourself with your environment and the laws that govern it. Be a responsible individual of your craft in your country, so you can be a contributing citizen. Whatever you do, the end goal should be to make your country proud. Don't go around putting your craft in a negative light, making controversies. To advance this society and the film industry in this country, we need to conquer both the art and the business of filmmaking.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*That said, how do you think we can bridge that segment or gap in the local film ecosystem?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

First, we don't have a film commission here in Brunei. Second, we don't have an association. There's no organisation or committee that can control the production of film and its standards. There's no one here to evaluate us. There are a lot of people who can claim they are making films, simply because they own a DSLR and have their family members or friends to help out. The same people would also push cinemas to show their content. Because of a lack of proper voice and guidance, everyone just assumes they are right. Then there are people who claim films are only films if they are made with 1 million dollars budget or more. They judge films on how much budget is being spent on it, instead of the overall quality.

Back in the day, people understood that to be able to direct a film, a director must have experience in at least directing a few TV dramas or series. They believed that it came with experience. Nowadays, people think they can skip that essential experience, and go straight into becoming a filmmaker or film director. Today I'm something else, tomorrow I will buy a camera and become a filmmaker. So who is there to say whether these individuals are ready or not, or are ready to dive into a bigger production scale?

It also begs the question of what kind of filmmaker are we developing here? Will you be the kind of filmmaker who disregards all critics and audience's notion of wanting to watch a film, and be happy as long as you make a film? Or are you making films in hopes that you are contributing somehow economically, either to yourself or your country? Even for these questions, many still can't answer or understand. Someone can easily claim their film is great, but when asked how many tickets were sold, who watched it, did you get any feedback, they couldn't care less.

I truly believe that anywhere else, this matter would be under study and constant monitoring, thanks to the presence of authority bodies such as film commissions and film associations. They would try to unite everybody to help them understand how it should work, and most importantly in setting benchmarks in filmmaking. They can help in explaining that a benchmark doesn't simply exist for personal reasons, but it is to involve the reasoning behind viewer's motivation to watch films.

Additionally, correct me if I'm wrong but I believe that in Korea, whenever content or films are made, they always have a strong Korean identity. When it goes out of the Korean market to other countries, others come to like that identity, people want to follow K-pop, they want to go to Korea. But here, some content creators or filmmakers aim to make content of the standard that is like Hollywood or European, forgetting that they are Bruneian, and they are in Brunei. Why would Hollywood want to see another Hollywood? Of course, quality-wise we do have to aim high, but we shouldn't lose our identity in the process. We have yet to find a consensus that can confidently say, "This is Bruneian identity", or when we shoot something here, to say that this is how a Bruneian story should be.

We will still encounter filmmakers along the way that still think, "Who cares about quality? People just want to see/hear the story". There is some truth in their opinion as well because even with good cinematography, good lighting, a big budget but the story doesn't engage the viewers, it will still be pointless. One important point to take from this is when filmmakers understand the balance and combination of visual, sound, movement,

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

Mise-en-scène and everything else. When you put those combinations on screen properly, viewers can't really nitpick one by one yet they can feel everything. This is what filmmakers should aim for. But who here at the moment can set that standard? We don't have that yet. It can be done if we have an association or film commission, if someone leading these bodies is someone who understands and is passionate about filmmaking. It cannot be managed or led by someone who only sees the benefit for themselves, or only for their personal gain.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*How much does government or public support play a part in encouraging filmmaker's endeavours to portray Bruneian identity in their art? Do such things exist in our industry at the moment?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

You can't say there's no government or public support at all, but at the same time, they are not currently providing a lot. It's just an okay situation at the moment, because we don't have a film commission or association, and even filmmakers are not that united. Everybody is behaving like a separate group, so it's a bit difficult. We also have to understand that anything that the government wants to support has to have social and economic benefits and impact. If those benefits can't be justified, why would the government want to support it? So in this case, if you have an association or film commission who can draw up and present information that the government wants to see, such as the film industry's vision, plan and development in the previous or upcoming five years, then maybe the government can be better persuaded.

Now, agencies like AITI, even though they're just interim, have been helping a lot. Just imagine an agency or body that is long-lasting and passionate about helping the local film industry, without their own ROI – instead supporting with the intention to boost filmmaking overall. AITI can only do so much because they need to see results in order to keep up their support: the actions need to be justifiable and measurable. Thanks to their current initiative for *Ada Apa Dengan Rina*, for example, it was awarded the special jury award at the ASEAN Film Festival. Then we have six works successfully produced by locals that is playing on the national TV station, and we also have our short dramas, *The Bungsu Story* (2018) and *Jaguh* (2021) that were amongst the top five nominations for the ASEAN Contents Award in two different years. If you look at these achievements, they are still considered individual achievements. But for sure there are more companies that can produce content passionately and lead to better social impact as a whole, which then could help boost the film industry as providing a much more measurable economic impact. If this is an achievable and lucrative pattern that the government can see, of course the government could support more.

I also know that for two years in a row, the Legislative Council of Brunei has brought up matters regarding the creative industry and what it can do to support the nation's growth. I truly believe that the government needs more input, success stories and push from the industry itself. On another side, the downfall that can be seen is that the filmmakers just keep on hoping for support but they have nothing to show for it. They can't keep hoping without justifying why they need certain things to be supported or provided. If they can provide good justification, anyone would probably jump in to help.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Since you mentioned film commissions and film associations, do you know if there have*

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*been any efforts done here to make it happen, and can you point out any obstacles or setbacks that it currently faces?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

When I was working as a consultant for one of the agencies that is working on producing and promoting content, I always encouraged production companies to set up an association. Within the last two years, there were efforts both privately and from the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports made to establish that and a film commission. I am not exactly sure what the status is now, but I am hoping that it will be established soon. I also attended one or two of the meetings before. I observed that different companies have different responses and acceptance where some questioned why there needs to be an association. It's understandable that some companies may feel that their standards are above certain companies already, so they are sceptical on why they should be in an association together. But I believe that we have to start something first, even if it means with only two or three companies. Together, they can put up a demand and showcase something and slowly people will start joining you.

To be honest, it works hand in hand. For example, if you ask something to a board of authority as an individual, of course it will be very hard for them to listen to you seriously, but if it comes from an association or federation, then it will be a serious matter. And if you have a film commission that is normally supported by government agencies, the demand for support will keep going up the hierarchy of authority.

I also believe we need a government agency specifically focused on developing this sector. Similar to FINAS in Malaysia, and SFC in Singapore. Their task is solely to develop the film industry with certain allocated funds. I remember before I started working with a government agency, I tried working individually to promote Brunei content at Hong Kong Film Festival, Singapore International Film Festival, and Busan International Film Festival. The reception was so-so, a quick greeting and barely any interest given by other attendees. But when you come as a government agency, the attention you receive will be different. Individually you are working or competing against thousands of productions worldwide. With an individual approach, you could appear unimportant to the people with power. On the other hand, approaching them as a government agency, it builds more confidence so you can establish a relationship such as Memorandum of Understanding between two or more parties.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*So what kind of impact can a film association or commission bring to local talents?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

If you have an association, you can come up with proposed policies or initiatives. These proposals can be presented to a higher level, and with persuasive justification, the government can try to allocate a certain fund for local talent or production companies. With film commissions in place, they can network with other countries' film commissions which can help our local content to go into other markets, and help market not only our content but our talent as well. Not to say that we don't have talents that are successful internationally, but again these are individually counted so far, not seen as the nation's or as an association approach. Just imagine if you had a proper channel, maybe we could bring up more talents internationally.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*Where and how does distribution support come from in our country, publicly or privately?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

I know that there are a lot of local filmmakers now who wish their film could be played in the cinema, locally. Off-site will be a bit difficult, but you still can achieve that if you show that you have successfully screened locally as well. But the problem now is that the cinema owners keep rejecting them. It's nothing personal because you have to understand that cinema is a business. If cinema owners have to choose between screening blockbuster films or local films, of course they choose the lucrative one: blockbusters. And this is a good example of where a film association and film commission can come in to help, to negotiate with the cinemas. Another reason why cinemas are reluctant is because there's no guarantee of the quality of locally produced content. They won't have the time to filter all local submissions on their own, to see which one is good enough and which one isn't. If there's a body like a film association or film commission that is trustworthy and reliable, they can tell them quickly and simply which content fits the minimum criteria to be screened in the cinema.

When you are small, you cannot make demands. So you have to be smart and strategize. As a filmmaker you have to research and know important upcoming movie premieres and release dates. Then you can target empty slots, instead of demanding that the cinema give you dates that compete with important release periods such as prime time, Christmas special and so forth. You will not win that negotiation. Back when we successfully premiered *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* on Times Cineplex, they only had one branch at the time. Now they have branches in three Brunei Districts already, and there are a few other cineplexes established as well. That said, I think with a film association and commission in place, there should also be a special cinema built specifically for local content. If this exists, local content and films can have more time rather than the limited period usually set by cinemas on local content. Something that works like the Mandatory Screening Scheme in Malaysia but runs in a cinema owned by a film association or film commission. Similarly, a one-stop centre where you have studios that filmmakers can use, a cinema where filmmakers can productively screen their content and put it on air, essentially a hub where filmmakers are not only able to learn about filmmaking but also distributing, promoting and marketing their content to the public.

**H. Amal Nabilah**

*What do you think of filmmaker's efforts so far in supporting themselves in funding their projects?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani**

It is a bit difficult here, yes. If you want to compare with Hollywood budgets or just the neighbouring countries' budgets for their films, the scale over there is much bigger. On average, the smallest budget would probably amount to BND 300,000 [US\$230,000]. And all these filmmakers or studios are individuals that come from different backgrounds. Here, just to produce a film budgeted at BND 20,000 to BND 30,000 [US\$15,000-\$23,000] is already an achievement. Going back to if we did have a film association or film commission in place, these bodies could probably help push a budget proposal for the government to review and support. These proposals will still need to adhere to any government implemented system of ROI if demanded. For example, if the government funds a certain amount, then the filmmakers need to guarantee that this amount will be coming back into the economy or this pool of funds created, in that amount or more than the fund originally gave. This way, the fund can be generated efficiently for the next generation of recipients, instead of it being constantly depleted. Through this, filmmakers will learn to develop a film funding strategy that over time requires them to demand less

**Farid Azlan Ghani** funds but be able to generate income substantially on their own, building a sustainable system for themselves.

Another method that has been practised abroad to fund film projects is crowdfunding. This method can be quite sensitive in a sense that how can we make sure that the fund generated or collected is being used properly? With a film commission in place, they can help tackle this problem by providing guidelines to follow, and convince the potential crowdfunders that these filmmakers are trustworthy. There's always risk in business dealings, but we are already living in a very peaceful country so anything that we decide to do, we should guarantee that peace is retained and should not be disturbed. When I hear people saying that with the government involved, there's a lot that can't be done: I don't really support this notion. In actuality all you need is a proper mechanism in place that can justify and convince them that your action is not to misuse funds but to support the nation's growth economically and socially, and beneficial for those in the film industry. In that case, it will be hard for them to disagree with you.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *Where do you want to see Brunei's film industry in five years time?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** For sure, this industry should be making a good economic impact that benefits all. That people can make a good living by working in this industry. Jobs in the film industry will be as standard as other jobs. In other countries, jobs in filmmaking can be considered as high income jobs. Maybe in five years time, the same job here wouldn't be considered as high income yet, but people can make a good living out of it. If that happens, it's a good sign that our industry has developed really well.

All this will be hard to achieve if everyone stays in the mindset of the individual. We need to work as a team to make everyone in Brunei appreciate Brunei content. Because once the local appreciates local contents, people outside will be able to see that too. Bear in mind that other markets and foreign powers and markets will continuously look for areas to develop in the world, so before they start seeing Brunei as a place to grow their influence, the locals should step up and bring up the country's name.

**H. Amal Nabilah** *Anything else on your mind that you would like to share with our readers?*

**Farid Azlan Ghani** If I can, I would just like to emphasise the segmentation in our film community here. Our fellow filmmakers especially in Brunei shouldn't feel the need to compare themselves against each other to the point of breaking our unity. If another fellow filmmaker managed to produce a content but it is not to our liking, our job is not to judge and disregard them but to support their effort in this craft. We are still a considerably small community, we need to help each other. If somebody did something bad – a bad picture, bad production, bad film – our intention should be to guide them together to be a better filmmaker in the future. Learn from each other's mistakes and share each other's achievements. Be more open-minded, and take criticism with the mindset of learning. If you want to create a proper industry, you also need to be closer to the viewers, understand what they want. We cannot be selfish and disregard their motivation to watch our content. Yes, we all have our style and signature or favourite genre to make. Try to balance your strength with the viewers' wants. It's been a noticeable pattern here that filmmakers always like to cater to viewers that have been exposed to education abroad. But actually, the ones who are

**Farid Azlan Ghani** willing to go far to support you are those back home, your people who are just easily entertained by any form of entertainment as long as it brings them joy.

With the establishment of organisations like film association or film commission, together they can work with filmmakers to not only build the industry but also build the viewers. Never forget that, economically, viewers play a big role in generating the revenue for your project. The more viewers you get, the more supporters your film gets. Even for a big budget film, if your film is not liked by viewers, you most likely will be out of business.

Just look at our neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Thailand. When you see their films, not only do the majority of their films speak their national language, portraying their culture or tradition but their movie's title is also in their country's language. It speaks a lot about the filmmakers intention. Maybe if you look at Malaysia, they also have a segmented audience because they have to cater to Tamil-speaking viewers, Malay-speaking viewers, and Chinese-speaking viewers. Whereas in Brunei, our main segments can be seen as Malay speaking viewers and English speaking viewers. There's yet to be a Bruneian film where the language and culture is Brunei Malay, which includes the seven ethnic groups that we have. I believe in filmmaking, if you are not careful, you can be the factor in cancelling a culture or nation's identity. That's not to say that I don't think you should make Bruneian content that speaks in English or standard Malay, just to be careful in your intention and the goal of your film. Try not to instil an identity that we borrowed from Western or foreign influence. Being able to live up to your Bruneian identity is a beautiful thing to have and be proud of. How you portray of your country's culture is important.

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**by H. Amal Nabilah (nabilhjj24@gmail.com)** is an aspiring filmmaker with over five years of visual storytelling experience in producing, script-writing and directing content under various production houses in Brunei Darussalam. She wrote the Best Short Film Award winner for MOU AKSI 2018, *Lumrah Dania* in 2019, and was appointed as Brunei's Talent Coordinator and Production Manager for TvN & Studio Dragon Netflix Series, *Arthdal Chronicles*. She also produced and co-wrote the winner of Brunei Film Blitz 2019 Islamic Category Short Film, *Mereka*. Amal is a member of the International Film Business Academy from Busan Asian Film School, Republic of Korea (2022).



# HARLIF BIN HAJI MOHAMAD

President of Film / Theater Evolution Association (FITREE)

Brunei Darussalam

Interview by Imelda Groves

Harlif bin Haji Mohamad is the president of FITREE association in Brunei. Since childhood, he has been active in the creative industry as he came from a creative family background. His involvement and experiences since growing up as a teenager was very extensive, not only domestically but he was often sent overseas to attend various events and activities. Due to his deep interest, he and his wife managed to establish a production house, and he is the co-founder of their company called Regalblue Production.

FITREE was established on December 5, 2012. Among the purposes of FITREE is to increase the quality, creativity, and quantity of film and theater of the new generation of Brunei Darussalam. It also aims to provide knowledge on film and theater to Brunei Darussalam artists in particular, as well as the general public through workshops, seminars, courses, roadshows, etc. It also aims to preserve the welfare and well-being of Brunei Darussalam film and theater artists as well as many others related to film and theater in Brunei Darussalam.

Imelda Groves

*Why was FITREE created / established?*

Harlif bin Haji  
Mohamad

During the year 2012 we were already in production for our first feature length film. Before the production of this film, we have been doing so much research about it that we found some difficulties to get information as an individual. Just because we don't have any focal point to refer to. No association, no group, nobody to refer to. That was when we thought of establishing this association with an intention to develop and maybe help Brunei filmmakers, because we don't want them to feel the difficulties we had in preparing and producing local films. Just imagine during that time, we don't have places to go for help in terms of promoting the film, seeking the budget, funding and grants. We tried to ask for government help, but they advised us not to come as an individual, it's better to collect the information as a group or association. As you can see here in Brunei we have a lack of film activities, such as filmmakers gathering to exchange knowledge, experiences, seminars, forums talking about issues they are facing. Outside the country we can see how their film commissions actively help and organize useful events for their filmmakers.

One particular event that I attended, if I'm not mistaken, was an event for Brunei Creative Industry. I think you were there to do some news coverage. This event was organized by Ministry of Culture, Youths and Sports (MYCS), Brunei which was not only focusing on film but also consisted of musicians, painters, all those people that are considered as the creative industry. It was in Bridex, Jerudong, around 2010-2011. So during that time I attended one of the forums with international filmmakers, and this was when they asked me about a film commission, groups and associations that did not exist. They asked us how we are going to ask for funding or grants or support if this kind of group is not available here. So this person, I don't remember his name. He was from Germany. He suggested that I at least establish a group or an association, no need to be big, he said. Because they are all aware there is no film commission like FINAS here. It's really hard to refer to if we have any issues or questions with regards to film here in Brunei. So we just wanted to try.

To be honest during that time, we actually don't want to make this FITREE as a priority, but we thought if we don't try we will never know what this association can do for us. It was slow as well as hard to juggle it with other priority and commitments. We managed to gather the members that consisted of not only filmmakers, but theatre people as well, actors and actresses.

Imelda Groves

*I see, that's how the idea to establish this association happened. Ever since that, how have you gathered the members of this association?*

Harlif bin Haji  
Mohamad

This was another hard part we have gone through. This association is basically a non-government & non-profit organization. So we didn't force people to come and join this association. Because we know this association provides no salary. Even the fee to join was set in the paperwork just to make it valid. Oh yes, during that time when we approached a government they were not really keen to entertain us, they said it's better from a registered association. So we gathered people who have experiences in managing an association. During the process of registration it was kind of a hassle, but okay. The member's name that we wanted to register in this association had to go through a background check with Registry of Societies (ROS) under Royal Brunei Police Force

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

which took us many months to get the approval of registration. It was a longer process after we managed to gather around 30 members. At first we were also scared to set up this association because we were afraid the members will end up arguing or debating during meetings. We just want the association for an easier discussion, not to debate or flash back to troubling incidents. Hence we are really careful with the name of this association as well as the members. During the trial year we didn't expose ourselves much, we slowly evolves just like the association's name, 'evolution'. Then again some of the highest committee members of this association were no longer active due to other bigger commitments, like they've been working as an officer in a government agency.

**Imelda Groves**

*Who did you encourage to be in this association?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

The founding members of this association do have an age limit. Because we want to focus on the evolution of film and theatre in Brunei, not to condemn or debate issues we've been facing for years. So younger people are welcome. I'm not saying the veterans are not allowed, we just want to focus on the intention and objective on how to help the next generation. Not to be one of those rebellious associations, that makes every meeting difficult with arguments especially involved with money. If that happens, every meeting is going to be a waste of time. But with this association we aim to appreciate and promote the veterans who have been involved in filmmaking before us.

**Imelda Groves**

*What was the latest event FITREE has done?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

To be honest, this association has not been active since our last big successful event. You remember, right? It was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first Brunei film, *Gema Dari Menara*. The reason why it is not active, because the members have been busy with their own commitments. Back then, if it's only us (Harlif & Nurain) to organize the event, we still can do it even without FITREE. But people will say why us? They'll think it was something to do with names, which is why we have FITREE to organize an event. Then again, as time goes by and our age increases, we have to admit that energy starts to decline. That's why we need younger and more energetic people.

**Imelda Groves**

*Tell the readers more about the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first film ever made in Brunei.*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

In October 2018, we held the celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Gema Dari Menara* to expose and lift up the film's name. Not many people knew about it. This event was organized by FITREE because if we use Regalblue Production to organize this event people will start to question us. If we think about it, we got nothing from it, no profits, by going through all the hassle of organizing that event. But we are satisfied to help expose the real first film in Brunei. We were sincere and happy to do it. Plus it helps to answer people's questions about film in Brunei. Who knows, 10 years ahead this film may need to be promoted again, or maybe our film or your film will need this kind of exposure, you never know.

Back to *Gema Dari Menara*. During the launching of our first feature length film, *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* (AADR) in 2013, we were mistaken as the first theatrical Brunei film ever launched. Some Bruneians didn't know about the first film ever produced in 1968 which is

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

*Gema Dari Menara*. Some people say, this film was banned and will not be able to screen in Brunei. Some people said it was not the first film ever produced. We managed to do research about it and try our luck by sending the film for censorship to the Brunei censorship board. Surprisingly it was approved, though of course some scenes needed to be censored by blocking or blurring small parts of the visuals. This adds on to the research made on the film industry in Brunei by Mervin Espina. After 50 years it is good to celebrate these people who are involved in this film, they feel very much delighted and happy watching it back on a big screen. Looking at their joy and smiles, makes us forget our exhaustion for making the event a big success. Thanks to people who helped us and made it happen.

**Imelda Groves**

*As you are aware, for every event organized, or every meeting to set up, money is needed. Where did FITREE collect their money?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

(Laughs) Money will always be an issue. Actually, that anniversary celebration was planning to go on tour to all four districts in Brunei. Again because of money issues we only managed to focus on the main district and one small event for screening in a school in Temburong District.

So to answer your question, most of the events organized by FITREE were using our (Regalblue Production's) equipment; the logistics are mainly handled by us. In most meetings, refreshment is also provided by us. Yes we did collect money from committee members of FITREE, it was just BND 10 from each member to pay every year. But some pay it, some don't. And that has happened only once since this association was established. Again I mention this to you, we just didn't try hard enough. FITREE was not exposed enough, that's why it may look slow and inactive. I must say, not yet. We have not expanded well yet. Maybe one day it will, with all the energetic and active members on it.

**Imelda Groves**

*Are there any other associations related to films in Brunei?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

Oh we were even surprised, during the process of registration of FITREE, the Registry of Societies told us that this is the first film association ever registered in Brunei at that time. I don't know about now. We've seen lots of other clubs or groups on social media but many of them are not registered associations. But this kind of association needs a lot of paperwork and a lot of meetings, because every year we need to submit an annual report to the Registry of Societies with regards to meetings we have been doing. So maybe that is one reason why not all activity groups are registered as an association.

**Imelda Groves**

*Besides the inactive members, what do you think will make FITREE more active?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

Teamwork. Even though in Brunei it is kind of hard, we believe it can be done. But we need active teamwork. Not just us. I think we (local filmmakers) can make it happen. Do lots of events, forums, seminars, talks and many other things. But we (Harlif & Nurain) can't do it alone without any support from others, especially the government agency and the young people who are currently growing up making films. Every association needs energetic and active members like the new generation now. For instance, I need somebody to replace me as FITREE president. But every time there is an annual member election, nobody wants to take this position. So since 2012, I'm the only president holding the title. I didn't

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

realize it's been 10 years for FITREE, and Regalblue Production celebrated its 20th anniversary this month.

**Imelda Groves**

*Speaking of Regalblue, I would love to know your personal journey in the film industry.*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

In regards to film, I started to plant my interest when I attended a one-month workshop organized by ASEAN-COCI in 1996. But if we want to look through my involvement in the creative industry it was since I was 12 years old. My family background is musicians. Since my childhood, I've been playing music. I followed my parents' invitation to perform at any wedding ceremony invitation. At the same time I also was active as a dancer until I was in my mid-twenties. During that time there were not so many local dancers, so I was given several opportunities to represent Brunei outside the country. I've been invited to London, Japan, Korea, and many others. This kind of event was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Brunei. From these wider experiences, I then started composing music. Composing music scores for drama. During the late eighties to nineties, there were a very limited number of local composers who owned and were able to compose music with digital pieces of equipment for Radio Televisyen Brunei (RTB). I was one of them. Ever since that I have always been involved with song composing, recomposing old songs and many others related to music.

After that, I started to further my studies, I managed to get into a technical college (Sultan Saiful Rijal Technical School), I took Radio Television Electronic Services (RTES) for City & Guilds certification. Over the years, I was sent to RTB for an industrial attachment year for about half of the semester (6 months). In 1993, I then got lucky to get accepted to work with RTB, full time with a monthly salary. I worked as a Technical Trainee at first at Crew & Film Unit, RTB. Over nine years of working my position had changed a lot, from soundman to cameraman. Cameraman was my highest designation before I resigned. When I was a cameraman, I learned a lot about shooting. I even have the opportunity to work overseas to do news coverage of some international events attended by His Majesty.

**Imelda Groves**

*But why did you decide to resign?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

During that time, well even now, I am so eager to learn something new. I wanted to pursue my study overseas. Because they provided an in-service training program for their staff. So I applied for it, but always got rejected by my officer, because back then they prioritized staff that were about to reach their pension age. I was younger so they thought I was not eligible for it. I was frustrated but it didn't stop me from wanting to learn. I even peeked in a window of an editing training course that happens in RTB. Every time during the arrival of a new machine. I secretly learned as a non-official student. Until one day (1996), FINAS invited Bruneian students for a course. Since Brunei has no film school the invitation went to RTB and I was just 24 years old and the age limit was just fine. I finally got the approval to go for the ASEAN-COCI WORKSHOP for Film and Video Students.

From FINAS, I started to learn deeper about the film industry, editing using film (Steenbeck), and learning from other students about film internationally. I also got a lot of encouragement to open up a production company; I got inspired on how to start

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

venturing film for the Brunei industry. To add on, this was where I met my soulmate, my girlfriend, my best friend and my wife, Nurain Abdullah. She was a fellow from Thailand. Nurain graduated in Mass Communication from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

We got married in 1997 and Nurain has lived in Brunei since then. With our same passion for filmmaking, we started to do some research on local TV programs from the technical and creative aspects. Although we realized it was not easy to set up a production company, our intention was to apply what we had learned in school and from attending workshops to improve the quality of the local TV program. And as we always dream of having our passion as a career. So we convinced ourselves to give it a try.

The trend back then was that the production companies who were given TV drama series projects often hired production teams from Malaysia or Indonesia to do all the work. The team comprised only 3-4 people, namely the director, cameraman, soundman, and video editor. So there was not much knowledge or experience transferred to local people from that.

So to answer your question, I resigned because I wanted to focus on Regalblue Production. That was the scariest decision I ever made. I'm glad it was not a mistake.

**Imelda Groves**

*When was Regalblue Production established?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

Regalblue Production was established in 2002. I was still with RTB while my wife managed the production. By 2003 I resigned and fully focused on Regalblue Production to avoid any possible conflict of interest. But during that time Regalblue was still a baby, so I did some freelance jobs as a cameraman and video editor with other production companies too.

**Imelda Groves**

*What was the first content Regalblue ever produced?*

**Harlif bin Haji Mohamad**

A local 13 episode drama titled *Workshop*. But before that, we made a music video to join the patriotic song competition. We didn't win though.

So back to the 13-episode drama series project we produced fully. During that time we needed to follow RTB processes such as to provide a company registration, company bank account with at least BND15,000, must have a demo reel, must rent a shop lot, must have approved equipment and the owner must have a qualification certificate in this field, and many others. This is for the grading process. If we lack one of the requirements we wouldn't get A Category, and below the C Category we would not be eligible to produce a 13 episode drama.

We almost did not get paid 75% of the project payment due to censorship issues. The protagonist of the series is a mechanic who has a vision for a future career, but does not care much about his own appearance, so his hair is almost shoulder length and not a neat hairstyle. And long hair for a Brunei character is really a no-no issue for the Brunei censorship board. They explained that it is against the Brunei norms. Fortunately, we could come up with an idea to add one more scene at the end of the last episode where we see the protagonist with a short and neat haircut, wearing a coat in a nice office. From

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

the long shot, I purposely jump-cut to a medium close-up shot of him, and I even had him speak to the audience (breaking the fourth wall) that “If you want to be successful, your image does matter”. It was very sarcastic, you know. But thank God, it passed censorship and we got the full payment.

The issue was quite memorable not only for us but for the censorship board too. I remembered attending a dialogue session between production companies and the censorship board about 5-6 years later, and they still like to talk about it as a case study.

**Imelda Groves**

*That must be hard. What if a start-up company who won't be able to meet their requirements?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Exactly, but nowadays the 13 episode drama project is no longer available. Plus you don't have to have a grade to apply for any tender that has been advertised. As long as you are a registered company that specializes in production. Then again it depends on your luck or your idea as well as the price we quote.

**Imelda Groves**

*So much has changed now. So after 2012, did Regalblue have the intention to make a film already?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Yes of course, the intention went back way earlier than 2012. Among other reasons that pushed us to produce feature length films was the issue of languages. Around early 2000, Radio Television Brunei always encouraged local production companies to produce drama series using Standard Malay language instead of everyday-speaking Brunei language. It was even mentioned in the contract. I mean the actors, actresses needed to deliver it in Malay Standard language. For me, it was lame. I have the experience of acting too; it makes me feel stiff and unnatural when I deliver my dialogue. The Malay standard in Brunei is different. So when you tried so hard to deliver it naturally in standard Brunei Malay, it came out sounding like half Malaysian half Indonesian, or some even sound like indigenous slang. It was awkward, a drama produced by local Bruneian but the language was this way. But if you look at the drama produced during the 1970s and 1980s, they spoke Brunei Malay and were well accepted by the audience. The 1990s and early 2000s were quite strange periods of time. They said by speaking the Standard Malay language it could probably help the drama to penetrate into a wider market. All advertisements at the cinema were using English language.

That's one of the reasons we wanted to make a movie, because we were eager to prove them wrong that using Brunei dialect will make the film or drama more natural.

And every time we talked about making a movie for cinema release, many people in Brunei insisted that we need Malaysian or Indonesian stars in our movie or else no one would want to watch our movie. We agreed that it'd help in selling the tickets, but we also wanted to experiment how the public acceptance would be for a fully-local-cast movie. So *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* was our experimental project to test many aspects of filmmaking in Brunei.

**Imelda Groves**

*I see the huge changes you made in the creative industry. So tell me more about the process of making Ada Apa Dengan Rina.*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

So around 2010-2012 was the year we did lots of research about making a film. We started asking around about the technical costs, like how much was the price to convert a film print (release print). Up to the end of December 2012, all cinemas in Brunei were using 35mm film prints. So when you produce the final product of a feature length film you need to convert it to a film print. That cost thousands of dollars for one print only and for one cinema location. So tell me, where to get that amount of money to show in multiple cinema locations? But we were so lucky. By the end of 2012, a few cinema owners converted their projection system to Digital Cinema Package (DCP) format film to play. Though it concerned us a bit, we believed the digital era was coming. In terms of technical aspects, it started to evolve.

I remember hearing one incident about the movie *Man of Steel*. The distributor of *Man of Steel* did not provide film print format to the cinema owner who requested it. That's the first release to forget about film prints entirely. That's why around 2014 most of the local cinemas started to convert their projection systems to DCP format.

Let's go back to your question on the process of making *Ada Apa Dengan Rina*. The intention to make a film started in 2007 already. We did a lot of research. I mostly did the research on technical aspects while Nurain and the scriptwriter researched the budget and developed the storyline. Regalblue even did a field trip to Malaysia and checked on couples of the movie shoots using a digital camera.

It took us around five years to study deeper about film before we started to produce one. I'm not going to lie, but at one point we almost gave up on this project. To the extent of selling the product to RTB only. Then in 2012, after we knew that the film print format was no longer the issue, we started production. It took us around two months for the production process. That was on and off, the filming was not done every day. We started to use digital cameras already.

After we managed to go through one difficulty we encountered another hardship, the post production process that requires us to convert to DCP. We invested in DCP software, but we were still unsure about it. So we brought the film to Thailand and converted the film to DCP properly, or shall I say using international standards.

But when we were in Thailand, we heard news about a Malaysian film being banned from Brunei cinema. This really scared us; God knows how we felt during that time. We could not stop praying.

**Imelda Groves**

*But why don't you go through the censorship board first? Before converting the film to DCP?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Because the censorship board wanted to preview it on a cinema screen. Using only DCP format. We started to gamble with the situation. So much uncertainty. Not to mention the obstacles. I still remember when we were waiting for the censorship board result; we were eating together in silence. We didn't talk to each other because our heads were running with lots of possibilities.

When we met up with one of the cinema owners, I knew he was not convinced. He said

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

they didn't accept any DVD format. He almost rejected us, because he thought we didn't know anything about DCP format. After, I gave him the DCP file and he tried it on the machine. When the file showed it was ingested to the system, he accepted it and ever since that we have become friends.

A day before the launching ceremony, we finally got the result. Just a day before the big ceremony, can you believe it? Thank God it passed the censorship process with "General - Suitable for all audience" classification. I can't imagine if it did not make it through the censorship board. The event with the guest of honor would have been canceled. The launching date was during the 29th National Day of Brunei Darussalam. It was February 23, 2013.

**Imelda Groves**

*That is one memorable and inspiring journey. Care to share with us about the expectation and achievement of this first film of yours?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

After five decades of Brunei being silent in the local film industry, we really didn't expect much. We expected around 40-50 percent occupancy and one week screening in cinemas, but we achieved 50-100 percent and a seven-week run in local cinemas. As for other achievements, this film has gone to more than 16 different countries for film festivals. We were nominated for Best Picture and won a Special Jury Award in ASEAN International Film Festival and Awards (AIFFA2013).

**Imelda Groves**

*What happened after the launching of Ada Apa Dengan Rina?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

After the success, I think it had a big impact on the film industry in Brunei. For instance the actors and actresses started to gain their fans, and the public started to approach them for photos and signatures. The big screen really gives the star an impact. Other than that, there was no more scepticism about using Brunei language in creative content. We see most adverts using Brunei language now. With all these we were glad we managed to open eyes and doors for local filmmakers, because after that more and more films launched. As I mentioned earlier, *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* is our experimental project. It is not a masterpiece but I believe it inspired many in different ways with one common statement "It is possible!, Let's do more!"

For Regalblue, we never stopped learning new things and started to venture something new. By 2017, we launched our second film *Ada Apa Dengan Rina 2 (RINA 2)*. This film was a co-production between Regalblue Production, Brunei and Lao Art Media Co., Ltd, Lao PDR.

Before you ask what we will do after our second film is launched, our passion for film will never die. And we will keep on trying to make films in the near future.

**Imelda Groves**

*That is so motivating. Do you see the Brunei film industry nowadays slowing down?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

The main reason of course is because of the pandemic. But it is still a good opportunity to develop our storyline while staying at home, right? For me it is now slow in terms of launching at the cinema, yet we still have lots of short films created. A couple of films were launched around 2021. So we are getting there, most of the youngsters are really active

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

nowadays in creating content. Though this new generation is really brave in creating content, I believe they still need support from other agencies or authorities to keep their creativity going.

**Imelda Groves**

*As President of FITREE, what is your future plan?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

I will never stop making films. I always have the desire to make films. We have to think as well about the film situation here in Brunei, how can we make it better and sustainable. As you can see from the growth of filmmakers in Brunei. So what we do today is no longer for me alone or my current generation, but for future generations. The ones who are going to continue the next generation in film. That's why FITREE was set up with the hope of contributing to the development of the film industry in Brunei together. To compete in a healthier way. On the other hand, I also hope that the establishment of the Brunei Film Commission will be realized. It doesn't have to be called a film commission, it could be any agency that will act as the focal point in film industry development. A body that will help at the policy level.

And I always believe that developing the industry needs to be done collectively. It takes time and we all need to work together. So it doesn't matter if younger generation filmmakers prefer to set up their own new association. I am happy as long as the spirit of FITREE in developing the Brunei film industry lives on, the name is just a name.

**Imelda Groves**

*How do you see film development in Brunei so far?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

I was lucky to be involved in the film industry as the technology evolved. Because of the rapid changes in technology, making films is easier compared to the previous era. We don't have to cut film rolls to edit. We don't have to convert to film prints to screen in the cinema; we don't have to burn it onto DVD to submit to film festivals. Everything is easy, lighting is getting smaller and lighter, cameras are getting smarter as well. The new generation has a passion for film, schools are providing more creative industry modules and easy access to information and knowledge, especially in the latest technology. It's the matter of creating an interesting storyline and budgeting. This new generation has courage to do everything, unlike us who are scared and really careful with every single detail. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.

What is more, the public are now more accepting and open minded. They support us in lots of ways, and criticize us in various ways. Other things that I want to touch on as well, young filmmakers have the chance to make money from their creation, especially with lots of platforms provided. You can see how easy platforms for them are created right? Like OTT platforms from Progresif Media, or RTBGo. AITI also supports the filmmakers by giving them a start-up grant for pitching and producing programs especially for local content creators. So yes, so many changes and development, in line with the development of the technology. I am pretty sure the Brunei film industry will develop more in the near future.

**Imelda Groves**

*What do you hope to receive from agencies to help in developing the film industry in Brunei?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Government involvement to keep on helping the local filmmakers. We hope Brunei will soon have its own film commission. So that we have a focal point to refer to. It's not just focusing on film funding, I'm talking about self development as well. Developing the manpower to deepen their understanding in film, to make them more skillful. I can't deny some of them are already skillful, but they lack a few things for example the technical aspects like lighting. We need to constantly add on to our experiences especially with international involvement. So with this focal point body, for sure it will help develop more filmmakers or content creators locally.

Yes, we can easily get the latest gadget or technique for film equipment, but who will teach them? Yes, they can learn it from YouTube but it will be limited. Online courses are available but who will pay for their course fees? We do have the modules opened up in college but who will teach them? It's like you teach them about film, but where will they go after that if we don't guide them how film can make money. Yes they might be clever but for sure we still need support from official agencies.

Besides the platform and cinema owners who of course need to sustain their business, I really hope that one day Brunei will have its own cinematheque, a platform for locals to showcase their films. Or the filmmaker can premiere their film without having to rent a commercial cinema. Make one platform where filmmakers gather or do their activities. With this platform as well, maybe one day Brunei can host a film festival or film appreciation screening. I believe one day Brunei can do this, slowly.

**Imelda Groves**

*Is there any hint that this film commission may happen in Brunei?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Yes. In 2018 all local filmmakers were invited for several meetings with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. They asked us if one day Brunei has a film commission, what do we want to include in it? We discussed a lot; we provided them a lot as well. But up until now there is not much of an update. Maybe because of the pandemic, everything is getting slower.

**Imelda Groves**

*I think I took up far too much of your time, let's go to the last question.  
Any advice for new local filmmakers?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

Keep on going. Keep on making films. Even though the film industry market in Brunei is still small and slow, we need to continue to fight for making films. We need to be aware of film development in our surroundings. Keep on learning something new and don't be afraid to dig deeper into anything related to film internationally. We know Brunei is far behind. Now it's time to study more. We need to participate more with international film activities. Our participation in international film festivals is still low. Yet so many people are interested to know about Brunei. So create and expose more about Brunei. If it's not us then who else? Don't let outsiders create a Brunei story. So many Brunei stories to tell the world. What's left is our creativity to deliver it. We need to be brave to try. Have the courage to make a film, because film is not something that you can sit and plan in a short time. Planning and reality are different so we need to try it no matter what. After it happens we learn from the mistakes to develop.

We also need to be up to date with this very fast paced era. That's why we can see the new

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

generation are more confident compared to our era where we are still scared to try. To be honest, during our era, the more we learn new things, the more we are afraid to do it. From my own experience the more I learn new things the more I am reluctant to do it. But now, I'm glad the new generation has the courage to try and be more confident.

Other than that, participation in film festivals also can be an eye opener. We get to meet new people, do some networking, and exchange our experiences and knowledge. If you need to learn, get the opportunity to learn. If you need to pay for it, invest in it. Keep on practising self-development.

**Imelda Groves**

*Anything else you want to say?*

**Harlif bin Haji**  
**Mohamad**

One more hope that I want to touch. I really hope Bruneian keeps on supporting locals, especially in the film industry. If we don't have any support locally how we can develop and go far? Once we have support from the public, we as the filmmakers need to improve our film quality as time goes by. With that we can gain the trust from them. With that, people will not look down on us. We need to improve our quality and standards as a filmmaker. We don't have to be influenced by Hollywood films. The originality comes from the local itself, the more local the film is, the more outsiders will be curious and eager to know more about Brunei. We need to preserve that Brunei identity in film.

We also need to focus on one field. We need to commit to it until the end, don't make it halfway.

We really hope this film spirit will keep on going and will keep on developing. We really hope all the filmmakers in Brunei help each other and together succeed in making the film industry keep on growing. Let's just compete with each other in a healthier and productive way. Lift each other up for the success of the film industry.

*- May 12, 2022*

by **Imelda Groves (sslifz@gmail.com)** is a freelance actress, writer and content creator from Negara Brunei Darussalam. She is the Production Manager for Visual Dimensions Production. Imelda is a fellow from Busan Asian Film School 2022.



# SILA CHY THMOR

CEO of Sabay Digital Corp.  
Cambodia

Interview by Thy Seng

Sila Chy Thmor initially worked as a tour guide, and then his first successful business ventures centered around selling CDs. Afterwards, Sila chose to shift his focus from electronics to fast food. In 2001, he founded BB World, a burger-focused fast-food restaurant chain. He also founded a chain of cafes under the name T&C in 2003.

In 2007 Sila began investing in the then growing web industry in Cambodia. He founded a media company, Sabay Digital Corp and invested in the Major Cineplex cinema franchise from Thailand. He also established an OTT platform called Soyo and Sabay MVP film distribution.

Having become an influencer on Entrepreneur flagship JCI, he continues to inspire other young fellows to create their future. Moreover, he has actively invested in and produced many films while working to update cinemas in Phnom Penh to multiplexes with modernized offerings such as 3D, 4DX, and IMAX cinemas. These efforts are now spreading to major cinemas in other Cambodian cities such as Siem Reap province and Baviet City of Svey Reang province.

Thy Seng

*How did you become involved in the film industry?*

Sila Chy Thmor

I first started to run a business selling CDs and making music on an entertainment platform. Since then I have strived to convince other people to work in the entertainment sector, since it has more potential for growth. But it is also challenging, especially in our country, regarding film.

As you can see our Cambodian films have tended to come and go, rise and fall. So I always said to myself that if I have a chance to build cinemas, or to be involved in this field, I must do this to take control of the destination of this industry. That is my first idea before establishing the first multiplex in 2010.

In addition, I have always called for others to work in making films or do some business in film. However, you know it is always a challenge. That's why not many films have been produced. So, if nobody else is producing, let me be the one to do it.

Opening multiplexes is one of the most effective windows to give filmmakers a chance to screen their films. Without multiplexes, where else to screen their films? And how can we make our film industry grow if we don't have multi-cinemas?

Thy Seng

*Can you tell me more about the films that you have produced or invested in? What has that experience been like?*

Sila Chy Thmor

I have produced many films, but I mostly co-produce with other producers who have drawn up the plans and scripts. As the co-producer, I invest in those projects. We have produced more than 10 films in this way, and in addition, I produced a few more films for my platform. Some of the projects are TV drama series and web series, and some projects are feature films for cinemas.

We have produced some good movies like *Gem on the Run* or *Poppy Goes to Hollywood*, which is the second feature film to screen successfully in the cinemas. It is a kind of success, but it is based partly on how you define success itself, whether in terms of popularity or box office. I can say that *Poppy Goes to Hollywood* is a one of a kind successful romantic comedy that is not slapstick comedy, and that it gained popularity locally.

However, I think films without proper scripts and too much comedy have seemed to take over the market, rather than quality films, which becomes a struggle for film producers who are committed to making better films. They usually don't gain much at the box office, even though they are so popular among international or local audiences. It seems to be a key issue in Cambodia, I guess.

Thy Seng

*What suggestions do you have for other film producers in order to make good films?*

Sila Chy Thmor

I think that producers and audiences aren't matched in terms of their preferences. That is the reason why Cambodian film can't reach its potential. Our film standards are lower than those of blockbuster films – and those who watch higher standards always expect more, so they don't watch local films. But our standards are higher than the slapstick

**Sila Chy Thmor**

comedies which mostly win the box office.

So it seems our producers or filmmakers don't go so far as to reach the blockbuster standard, and can't lower their standards like those box office slapstick films. There is still the glass ceiling that we have to break through, otherwise, we can't go either high or low.

"Being an artist means to be stubborn". I use this phrase because I know those producers and filmmakers make films because they love it. They have to take risks to make it, and those directors who love film can go to work with sleepless nights. So, it is not wrong. But I think that they should have a very open mind. I don't mean that their minds are not open, they have watched a lot of films and learned a lot too. However, we should accept some criticism and be willing to learn. They should go through learning many different processes.

A good film needs to have a lot of elements combined, like molecules processing together. It could happen from their experiences watching so many films, listening, improving scripts and thinking, etc. And maybe we should work with those who have experience in making it together.

However, generally, those directors or filmmakers take things very personally. They always have an attitude that the film is theirs, like "It is my baby, don't touch it". It's a problem if everybody always stands by themselves, and they miss out on sharing ideas or learning more to make a better film.

A movie is not a single shot that kills. It is sure to have a few mistakes, or a lot of mistakes, or many many mistakes. So those experiences are accumulated from those first, second, third, or fifth times working together. A filmmaker should have the experience of producing short films, writing scripts, directing films for others, doing other technical works in films, etc. If you get there, and then you start to produce one film, then probably you can succeed with it. But we don't have such a person yet.

Unfortunately, we also don't have a film school that could provide us with enough human resources, and film workshops are rare. So, we need this industry to connect with the academy, with the ministry, with training and workshops to make it thrive again. We desperately need that so that we can make mistakes, think through a lot of things, and gain experience. And I still have hope that one day we can reach that dream, but I think this opportunity is for those younger generations like yours.

We need some more young people in the industry, and they should bend down a bit, listen more, and improve more so that this industry can also improve. If you think you are already the best, you will never improve. That is always the problem.

**Thy Seng**

*Being a cinema owner, what kind of strengths do you see in Khmer films in terms of the audience?*

**Sila Chy Thmor**

As a cinema owner, I can see that we have a lot of young people coming to the theater, and this is the strength. However, our market is still so small compared to other countries regionally, and there are a lot of people who don't know about watching movies in the

**Sila Chy Thmor**

multiplex. We still can count them as our potential audience, because some day they might watch films in our cinemas. But how we can convert them into fans or moviegoers is our mission.

Plus, we also have more opportunities to distribute foreign films in our cinemas, so what other countries have, we also have. It is an opportunity, and foreign films can be a huge boost to our film industry to help it thrive longer.

**Thy Seng**

*Do you think local audiences would prefer watching local films over foreign films, or vice versa?*

**Sila Chy Thmor**

Looking back to the past, the reason our film industry would always come and go was because we didn't have foreign films. It is because we had only Khmer films, and they are not always good. Some bad films spoiled the market, then nobody wanted to go to cinemas, and the cinemas failed.

Now we can see that the industry is going to last a very long time. But we still need to grow the market or increase the number of multiplexes, so that most people can enjoy watching films in the cinemas near their home.

However, there are some comments attacking cinemas that screen foreign films. I think they should consider making local film or their contents better so that our audiences will buy tickets to watch their product. Saying this doesn't mean I don't support Khmer films, but I would like local producers and film directors to be more critical. They should accept the facts and learn to work better or harder. There is nothing wrong with cinemas screening foreign content.

I believe there are still a huge number of local audiences who favor local content. Yet, the problem for producers is how to make decent content that can feed local audiences' needs. And cinemas are still open to providing a lot of support, such as marketing, and a high rate of revenue sharing to local producers.

**Thy Seng**

*You also established an OTT platform called Soyo. What is your vision for this kind of platform in the Cambodian market?*

**Sila Chy Thmor**

OTT is a universal trend as we can see with Netflix, Hulu, Apple TV, etc. The world is moving forward toward this destination, and especially during the pandemic it expanded enormously. It is the best opportunity available; however, looking to Cambodia, the challenge is content. When we don't have the most popular content, not many people will want to subscribe to our platform. It is the truth.

At first, we invested a lot of money in making new content for our OTT platform. We co-produced with a TV station making dramas, short films, feature films, film series, and episode films. But, to say this again, without any great or exciting content to convince people to subscribe, the platform has still not reached its peak yet.

Therefore, a lot of people are not convinced enough to subscribe to us now. But we still keep trying, collecting more content, producing more content, and hopefully some day

**Sila Chy Thmor** we can reach our target.

**Thy Seng** *Do you believe that OTT platforms will replace cinemas?*

**Sila Chy Thmor** I realize that the OTT platform is very enhanced and could provide a challenge for cinemas; however, it can't replace cinemas. I think these two platforms can co-exist and give producers opportunities to make more good content.

**Thy Seng** *What do you want to see in cinemas in the next 10 years?*

**Sila Chy Thmor** Over the next 10 years, I believe our cinemas will grow more and more, and hopefully, our film industry can catch up and thrive together.

- April 25, 2022

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

**by** **Thy Seng (seng.thykh@gmail.com)** is an independent filmmaker. He became a journalist and news reporter and later the senior news editor for a local social news media after his graduation from the Royal University of Phnom Penh majoring in Media and Journalism. Since then he has been working as a freelancer for documentary film, a TV assistant producer, and a self-made filmmaker. Since there is no film school in Cambodia, he has nurtured and sharpened his career in the film industry, and in 2019 he earned the second highest award from the Chatokmuk Short Film Festival. In 2021 he was selected as a Trainee of Japan Foundation as a film director, screenwriter, director of photography, sound operator, and film editor, and produced a short film during the training titled "WE MASK DATE". This film screened in the Japan Film Festival 2022 in Cambodia, as well as other local film festivals. He trained in the film producing program hosted by Busan Asian Film School.



# SANJAY GULATI

Crawling Angel Films

India

Interview by Aakash Chhabra

Sanjay Gulati is a film producer based in New Delhi, India. He is the founder of Crawling Angel Films, a production company known for its character-led narratives which stretch beyond language and genre. He began his career by gap financing Pushpendra Singh's debut film *Lajwanti* (2014) which he discovered in the Viewing Room of NFDC Film Bazaar. The film was later selected to premiere in the Berlinale Forum section. His filmography includes *Ashwatthama* (2017), *Once Again* (2018), *Pearl of the Desert* (2019), *Nimtoh* (2020) and *Laila Aur Satt Geet* (2020).

In the last decade, Crawling Angel Films has established themselves as a formidable brand in the Indian independent film circuit. Their films have screened at Berlin International Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Busan International Film Festival, MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, Singapore International Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival and MoMA New Directors/New Films. Their upcoming project *Girls Will Be Girls*, directed by Shuchi Talati, is an Indo-French co-production, which was selected for Gotham Week 2021 and Berlinale Script Station 2022.

## Aakash Chhabra

*How did you start your journey as a film producer?  
Would you like to elaborate briefly on your background?*

## Sanjay Gulati

When I was growing up and even today, pursuing arts in middle-class Indian families is something that was frowned upon. And as cliché as it sounds, kids were always pushed to pursue engineering and medicine. There is a popular quote which goes: the highest form of ignorance is when you reject something you don't know anything about. And I felt I had done that. I rejected classical music, classical dance forms, theatre and painting as boring without attempting to learn anything about them. In the late 90s and early 2000 I was running a successful biotech company. I felt that I had plenty of free time in the evenings. So, I started to visit the India Habitat Centre, which is New Delhi's premier institution for the promotion of arts and culture. I watched theatre plays of Naseeruddin Shah, kathak dance performances of Shovana Naryayan, Rajan and Sajan Mishra's Hindustani classical music performance, attended several photography and visual arts exhibitions and sometimes watched films as well. These people were the stalwarts of their generation and I started to look forward to visiting IHC. Soon I learned about a two-week long workshop on world cinema which was to be conducted by Ira Bhaskar, Shohini Ghosh and Madan Gopal. I was really curious to enrol but at the same time I was also a tad bit apprehensive because of my age. I was in my late thirties and I thought I would be an odd man out surrounded by college kids. But to my surprise there were people in their sixties, in their forties, along with college students in the workshop. Cinema had something to offer to all of us. Mani Ratnam and Nandita Das had come one day to interact with the participants and to screen their film *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002). By the end of the workshop I realised all the art forms which I had so experienced so far all came together in cinema. And apart from this I loved the collaborative spirit of filmmaking. You had to find the right set of people as well to create something. This is how I found my calling. I bought a membership for Habitat Film Club and just searched for opportunities to meet people who were interested in cinema in Delhi.

## Aakash Chhabra

*How do you think attending NFDC Film Bazaar Producer's Workshop helped you in shaping your career? And what are your thoughts on the role of film markets?*

## Sanjay Gulati

In December 2012, I came across an interview in the Indian Express Sunday Eye Magazine about Film Bazaar. Shubhra Gupta had interviewed NFDC Chief Nina Lath Gupta who had launched the Bazaar in 2007. It was a quite interesting read where Nina Lath shared her ideas about how to internationalise Indian cinema and provide a platform to young filmmakers by financing their films and helping them get in touch with buyers, co-producers, distributors and exhibitors from all over the world. So, the following year I decided to attend Film Bazaar. I knew I couldn't do much staying in Delhi and had to meet like-minded people to begin my journey.

Now, I wasn't sure if I could direct films yet and in my head a producer was merely a person who invested money. So, in my form I wrote that I'm interested in producing films. At the registration desk, I was sceptical if anyone would even talk to me. I knew so little about the language of cinema and here I was in the Mecca of Indian Cinema surrounded by people whose names I had only come across in the print and broadcast media. As part of the Producer's Workshop, we were allowed to access the viewing room. I could also access unfinished films. The program was quite intensive with co-production pitchings,

### **Sanjay Gulati**

industrial screenings, viewing room facility which has brand new films in the making and seminars taking place all day. I would choose the sessions I wanted to attend, and sometimes when there was a gap I would end up in the viewing room. I spent a lot of time there. It is where I found *Lajwanti*.

### **Aakash Chhabra**

*It can be a leap of faith trusting and collaborating with a debut filmmaker. What was your inspiration and motivation for producing *Lajwanti*? How would you like to describe its journey?*

### **Sanjay Gulati**

I got goosebumps watching *Lajwanti* in the viewing room. The film was seeking gap financing. And I thought that this could be my opportunity to learn something about filmmaking. So I started looking for its director in the market. In the evening, we had networking parties. I met Pushpendra Singh and hugged him. I congratulated him on making a landmark film. He thought I was an admirer who had enjoyed watching it. Much like his film, he is also very shy and reserved. And I'm not so different either. Not many people were talking to us at the party so we continued to talk to each other about the film throughout Film Bazaar. We stayed in touch afterwards too. I just had to convince him to get me on-board. I thought that buyers would jump out of their seats to gap finance *Lajwanti* and I didn't want to miss out on this opportunity. Some time later I went to Mumbai to meet him and we had an agreement.

A mere eight days later it was announced that the film had been selected in the Forum section at the Berlin International Film Festival. Pushpendra was over the moon but I couldn't understand it then. Whenever I travelled to Europe for business purposes, I would travel via Frankfurt and I thought that was a more important international centre than Berlin. Berlin had a much smaller airport compared to Frankfurt. Later, Pushpendra explained to me the significance of Berlinale. We had our world premiere on February 11 and I reached Berlin on February 6. I thought I had chanced upon a *Lunchbox*. I had read Ritesh Batra's interview from 2012 when his film *The Lunchbox* screened at Cannes. He shared that during the screening people started to walk out and he got tensed that they weren't liking the film. Later, he learned that they were buyers pre-booking the slots. So, I thought this is how people appreciate beautiful films. I imagined the same would happen to us. I had read how Guneet Monga printed Yellow Boots on her t-shirt to promote her film *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2010) during its Venice premiere. You couldn't put a poster anywhere on the pavilion. So, I wanted to follow into her footsteps. I would go to every single office in the European Film Market and tell them about *Lajwanti*. Some people thought I was really pushy but some appreciated my enthusiasm.

On the day of our screening we had a full house. People told me not to let go of the director and to continue working with him. This was also the day when I learned about the term 'arthouse films'. Until now I just knew about good and bad films. If something speaks to your heart it's good and if it doesn't it's bad. People told me our film was a festival film and wouldn't play in commercial theatres. Some even explained the commerce behind it. Our film was 62 minutes long and an average movie ticket in Europe was around 9 euros. And when someone spends that much money, they expect a length of 90-100 minutes. So, I started to understand things.

### **Aakash Chhabra**

*You have had a long association with director Pushpendra Singh. In fact, you have*

### **Aakash Chhabra**

*produced all of his films. How would you say your relationship as a director-producer duo evolved with each film?*

### **Sanjay Gulati**

While in Berlin, Pushpendra and I spent a lot of time together. Everything he spoke was like a masterclass to me. I would take note of even the tiniest of things. He expressed how he intended for the film to travel in the festival circuit. He taught me many new things about world distribution and the kind of films sales agents like. Though he is much younger to me, he became my mentor. So when he started to work on his second film *Ashwatthama* (2017), I joined him from the early stages. I was present for the entire shoot. I wanted to enjoy the process of making films after all. I would live with the team from Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. I learned from how they coordinated with each other. I was just starting to understand the process so I would patiently listen to the discussions taking place on the set. Like how they decided to go for black and white instead of colour as the way houses were painted in the village didn't go with the era our film belonged to. It received the Asian Cinema Fund and was later screened at the Busan International Film Festival.

Meanwhile, I met Kanwal Sethi at Film Bazaar. His film *Once Again* was a work-in-progress. I watched it in the viewing room as well. It was a German film and I joined in as the Indian producer. I learned about the post-production process and remained in Mumbai as we did the dubbing and music for it. It is a much bigger film with a commercial reach. There was a point when I was scared about the returns. Luckily, Netflix acquired the film and it all worked in the end. We screened it at the Habitat Centre and Ira Bhaskar introduced it. It was a very proud moment for me.

Then through Film Bazaar I met Saurav Rai who studied at Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute, Kolkata. I watched *Nimtoh* in the viewing room and was mesmerised by it. We went to HAF Hong Kong and then as part of HAF Goes to Cannes, we both participated in the Marche du Cannes. The film premiered at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival and International Film Festival Rotterdam. Though it didn't win the best film award at MAMI, I felt Saurav's film was better than the other films in competition. I can say this rationally because I had joined the film really late. I knew I had to work with him again, but from the beginning. We have just finished production on a new film together and will soon be ready to present it. What I love the most about Saurav is our long discussions on classic and contemporary cinema. He has shown me a lot of Ozu and Ken Loach films.

With Pushpendra, we made a documentary *Pearl of the Desert* (2018) which premiered at International Documentary Festival Amsterdam and then *Laila Aur Satt Geet* (2020) which was selected in the Encounters competitive section at Berlin International Film Festival. It was quite exciting for us. *Laila* did really well at the festivals. BBC 4 has recently bought the television rights and we are distributing the film in the United States through Deaf Crocodile. Mubi has been interested in the film but they pay peanuts. We're in talks with other OTT platforms as well.

In 2018, I met Shuchi Talati at the Film Bazaar. She is directing her first feature *Girls Will Be Girls*. Richa Chadha is associated with the project as its producer. They both invited me for an individual meeting on the fourth day of the market. I liked the film's idea and soon joined in as a co-producer. It went to the Jerusalem Script Lab, Berlin Script Station,

## Sanjay Gulati

and European Film Market. We won three awards at Berlin and secured funds. We had decided that we wanted to make the film with an all women crew. So, this month we'll be launching Bright Squad, a training program for women to take the roles of gaffer and grip which you don't find in our industry. People in Berlin loved this idea and gave us funding for it. Light N Light Equipment Rental Services in India is helping us with the training.

With Shuchi it is a different kind of experience. She thinks that I've produced six films so far, so I would know everything about everything. But I'm still learning new things, like appointing the HODs. I've been involved with her since the scriptwriting process and we're doing everything properly. Before this, we never had enough money and made independent films by running around, doing everything on our own. Here we have Dilip Shankar as our Casting Director. It feels good to know someone who frequently worked with Mira Nair is now doing our film. We're in talks with Production Designer Parul Sondh who worked on Rohena Gera's *Sir Is Love Enough?* (2018). Our filmography in the past makes it easier for us to reach out to people. These are really exciting times. Sometimes Richa is our boss, sometimes Shuchi takes the reins and sometimes I have to lead everyone. We've received a lot of grants as well and more are in the pipeline. And we're looking forward to beginning production in September or October.

When I had started to work with Pushpendra, we had a lot of learning gaps between us. I wasn't in a position to contribute much. He was way ahead of me. And I respect him for choosing to make the kind of cinema that he wants to. He likes to work with his friends from FTII and has his own style of doing things. With time he has started to understand my point of view as well. And my POV is that of a lay man, I'm a part of the audience. Like on our second film *Ashwatthama*, I had suggested a few changes and he implemented them. That meant a lot to me then. His validation still means a lot to me. We have reached a stage in our relationship where he offers me the space to express something I don't like in the film. It doesn't matter whether we agree or disagree on what a good film is, but just to have a space where we can put forth what we feel is important. And I appreciate that. What I've gained from him is invaluable and with each new film we make, the gap reduces. You can only work with like-minded people if your motivation is not money. Every film takes two to three years of our lives and we all should be able to enjoy this time with those we're collaborating with. Otherwise, there's no joy in making films. Pushpendra and I find joy in making films together.

## Aakash Chhabra

*Crawling Angel Films has made a mark in the international film circuit. How have you been able to navigate without getting into the OTT market or having theatrical releases?*

## Sanjay Gulati

I've poured my heart into every film I've made so far. I never started it for the money. I have a biotech company where I have more knowledge and experience than I have here. And with the amount of time I devote to this, it would be much easier for me to make money from that business. Profit-making has never been my agenda and I don't think I can either. If Akshay Kumar comes to me to produce one of his films, I cannot do that even if I have that money. I don't have the capability to think along those lines. Sometimes people ask me how much do you profit off a film. And I can't really answer them. I produce films because it makes me happy. In any industry when you begin, there is an incubation period, where you learn about the modalities of how things function. Then, you start to develop your own language. You have to invest your time and energy. You slowly build up a

## Sanjay Gulati

resume. I'm grateful for the films that I've been able to produce so far. *A Lajwanti* and an *Ashwatthama* may not have returned the money I invested in them but they gave me returns in other forms. And I cannot quantify them in terms of dollars. For my bread and butter, I have another business where I work without my soul. I have a family to take care of and a lifestyle I know I have to maintain for them. It may not be luxurious but I want to give them all the comforts.

I told you about *Laila* earlier, how it appealed to the mainstream sensibility in some countries. We've signed some deals for it. Now, this is our return. What we couldn't do it with the previous films, we're able to do now. It travelled to prestigious festivals in the world. The Toronto International Film Festival hosted a digital screening in the Bell Box. We were part of the Museum of Modern Arts New Directors/New Films in New York. We wouldn't have reached where we are without *Lajwanti* and *Ashwatthama*. They were my investments.

With my latest film *Girls Will Be Girls* I'm learning that a producer's role isn't to put their personal savings into a film which I had been doing so far. It is to be true to oneself with what we want to say with our film, and to generate interest such that public institutions and co-producers are invested in it to offer grants and put their money. All the films which I had made before this have paved a way for this. I have been working in the laboratory so far. Now, I'm scaling up with this film. I'm quite hopeful about the returns right now. There are other projects as well in the pipeline which can appeal to the funding bodies and film markets.

If you've seen Chaitanya Tamhane's *The Disciple* (2020), it isn't just the story of a classical musician but also of an independent filmmaker. You look at the trials and tribulations that the protagonist and his guru go through. The guru is devoid of materialistic desires. I've been very fortunate to find people like Pushpendra Singh and Saurav Rai who consider filmmaking to be their *sadhana*, who care very little about what they're getting in return from a film. I know that these people are purists who cannot be lured by big studios. The stories they tell are more important to them. And I want to continue making films.

## Aakash Chhabra

*What according to you is the best possible way for debut directors to reach out to film producers?*

## Sanjay Gulati

Reading a script is a very taxing affair. And I particularly prefer to read really slow. It takes me three to four days to finish a script. When I had just started doing this I would agree to read whatever people would send me, but then I would get upset in the middle of it most times. So now I've started to realise the importance of a logline and short synopsis. If I like these two things, I prefer to read a treatment which could be up to ten pages long. After this I don't jump to the screenplay. I prefer to check the previous work of the filmmaker because then I can see if he/she/they are able to translate an idea into the audio-visual medium. If someone hasn't made any short before, then I suggest they direct some. I don't expect all these films to be excellent but they should be at least a 5 out of 10. And if on my scale a film is at a 5 or above, I dive into the script and then see how much they're invested in making it. How much heart they've poured into it. And you cannot fake these things.

**Aakash Chhabra**

*What advice would you like to give to budding film producers who want to work outside the conventions of the mainstream industry?*

**Sanjay Gulati**

I wouldn't say that for every film we have to work outside the conventions. Films be it mainstream or arthouse should get a theatrical release. The halls should be house full. Which producer wouldn't want that. What is really important is to follow our heart. Most people at the international festivals complain that even though Indian films are rich in their content, they lack quality. We tend to compromise a lot. And I'm not just talking about the camera work. I say this from my own experience. If we want our films to break out of arthouse and cinephile discussions, then we have to realise that we need to work on this. Films like *The Disciple*, *Sir Is Love Enough*, *Masaan* and *The Lunchbox* have been able to surpass this bar and do wonders. We have to realise that there is a minimum budget we need in order to make a film. A lot of my previous films relied on personal favours. And to learn to challenge ourselves where we account for the quality at every stage of the film is really important. Filmmaking has become so democratic nowadays. You have labs and markets and forums. It's really important to read about them and participate in them. It is where you find like-minded people. People you might end up working with for the rest of your life.

- May 3, 2022

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Aakash Chhabra (aakashchhabra949@gmail.com)**, 26, studies Producing for Film at Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute, Kolkata. He is an alumnus of Locarno Documentary Summer School 2019, Ji.hlava Academy 2021 and Kyoto Filmmakers Lab 2021. His first short *Mintgumri* (2021) premiered at the Dharamshala International Film Festival, New York Indian Film Festival and received a Jury Commendation at the Toto Award for Short Film 2022. His short documentary *An Ordinary Day* (2021) won the Jury Commendation at the Nagari Short Film Competition 2021 and premiered on the official channel of the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen. His latest short *A Season of Mangoes* (2022) is selected to premiere at the Mumbai International Film Festival. He is presently working on his debut feature *I'll Smile in September* which has been selected for development at the International Film Business Academy Class of 2022 at the Busan Asian Film School (AFiS).



# MEENAKSHI SHEDDE

Curator / Programmer / Consultant

India and South Asia

Interview by Vaibhav Ingole

Meenakshi Shedde is India and South Asia Delegate, Berlin Film Festival, pre-selecting their films since 1998, and independent film curator, based in Mumbai. She completes 25 years working the the Berlinale in Feb 2023. Winner of India's National Film Award for Best Film Critic, she has been on the jury of 20 international film festivals, including Cannes, Berlin and Venice. She is also a Golden Globe Awards International Voter, the only one invited from India this year.

As Curator/Programmer/Consultant, she has worked with the Berlin Film Festival, TIFF Cinematheque-Toronto, Locarno, Busan, Dubai Film Festivals; British Film Institute (BFI), Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA, Australia) and Kochi Muziris Biennale (India). A senior journalist, she has freelanced for *Variety*, *Screen International*, *Sight & Sound*, *Film Comment*, *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Times of India*; is a columnist with *Sunday Middy*, and has written for/edited 21 books, mainly on cinema.

She has been Script Mentor/Consultant for 15 years' years on Script Labs worldwide, and on the selection committees of top script and film funds of prestigious film institutions in the US, Europe and Asia, including the Sundance Institute Screenwriters' Labs-India, Venice Film Festival's Biennale College Cinema, Rotterdam Film Festival's Hubert Bals Fund, Locarno Film Festival-Open Doors, Asia Pacific Screen Lab of Asia Pacific Screen Awards, APSA, Australia, for emerging Asian filmmakers; National Film Development Corp (NFDC, India), Dhaka International Film Festival's West Meets East Screenplay Lab; Dhaka Doc Lab; Sultana's Dream: Breaking the Silence: Script Mentor for an all-women lab addressing sexual abuse, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Klinik, South Asian Filmmakers' Lab, Docskool, Kathmandu (Nepal) and Bangalore. This work includes films, projects and scripts, both fiction and documentaries.

Vaibhav Ingole

*Did you have any film curating experience before you began working as a curator?  
How did you start your journey?*

Meenakshi  
Shedde

In my time, there was no option to learn to be a curator. You just had to learn on the job. This is still the situation for the majority of Indian programmers and curators; they have learned on the job. In fact, I conducted a Film Curating course for the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII, Pune) in 2021, online because of COVID.

I would consider a few people my key mentors: one is Amrit Gangar, a wonderful person, a film historian and scholar. He ran a film society called Screen Unit, and took incredible effort to help us appreciate great cinema. In those days organizing 35 mm film prints was complicated. He would source the 35mm prints in cans from the Russian Consulate or Swedish Consulate or wherever else. And then lug them to a theatre where he would organize screenings. He never charged fees for anything. In those days we didn't have computers, so he would make a lot of stencilled, cyclostyled notes about the background of the director, good reviews or interviews with the director. His knowledge and generosity gave us the tools to appreciate cinema. So he was a very crucial mentor in my life. Two more mentors were film critics Maithili Rao and Iqbal Masud (FG Gilani). They were really kind of *Eklavya* mentors to me, because I learned a lot from just reading what they wrote, their film reviews and essays. I learned to place a film in the larger social context, which gave me a lot of understanding of how to read a film. And in the last 25 years, Dorothee Wenner, earlier Delegate, India, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and now Berlinale Delegate for sub-Saharan Africa, has been an incredibly generous mentor, colleague and friend, guiding me to also look at Indian and South Asian cinema from an international perspective.

Art can really be a powerful social commentary, an artistic weapon, a political statement, a celebration, it can be many things. A film can be technically a masterpiece, but many elements go into a film, that create an impact on the audience. It is hard to say that film causes social change, but there's no question that it can be a great starting point, or something that accelerates thoughtfulness that brings about social change.

So, these were the people who influenced me, but there was nobody who taught me about curating as such.

Vaibhav Ingole

*What was your journey from being a journalist to a film critic to a film curator like?*

Meenakshi  
Shedde

I started out as a journalist, and then became a film critic. After I returned to India from Paris, where I worked for Journalistes en Europe, an 8-month French journalism scholarship programme, the Mumbai Film Festival had started around 1997. I was then working as Assistant Editor at the *Times of India*, Bombay, and I kept seeing fantastic films at the festival. I kept thinking here are all these fantastic independent films from all over India, in Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam and Tamil, but none of them ever got reviewed in the *Times of India*, because the official film critics would only review the latest Bollywood film or the latest Hollywood film. Nothing else existed for them. And I was horrified. So, I started reviewing independent Indian films for the *Times of India*. I was never the official film critic of any paper I've worked with. I've just written about films that I cared very passionately about, and wanted to discuss and share with other people. So,

I began being a film critic. The next year, in 1998, I won the National Film Award for Best Film Critic. I was surprised, because I was never ever hired as a film critic. I was Assistant Editor, so I was actually writing these very pompous editorials on international affairs, features, interviews and my own column for the Sunday section. So, film reviewing was completely my personal, guilty pleasure.

Soon after my award, I also got invited on the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Jury of the Cannes Film Festival (2001), Berlin Film Festival (2000) and Venice Film Festival (2002). Those were the big turning points in my life, because I thought you had to be 60 or 70 before you get invited to the jury at Cannes, but I was still in my thirties.

So, when you're on an important festival jury, you get to meet a lot of festival directors. You get invited to these formal lunches with the festival directors and programmers, and every time the festival directors kept telling me we know there are great films from India, but we can never access them. We get mountains of entries which are mostly trash. So, will you please recommend the best Indian films to us? So, I was very thrilled to recommend Indian films to them. Dorothee Wenner, who was then Delegate for India, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa for the Berlin Film Festival, very kindly arranged for me to have a contract as Consultant to the Berlin Film Festival, pre-selecting films for the festival based in Mumbai—and the opportunity radically changed my whole life. So that's how I got my first curating assignment, working with the Berlinale since 1998.

Mani Ratnam had his *Dil Se (From the Heart)* selected in the Berlinale in 1999, and right after, there was Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (Straight from the Heart)* in the Berlinale in 2000. These were two of the early big mainstream films when I started working with the Berlinale. However, India's reputation at international film festivals has always come primarily from independent films over the decades. But mainstream films have tremendously helped raise the profile of Indian cinema internationally. There is no question about it. So, I think both kinds of cinema are important to feed off each other and sustain a film industry that is also artistic.

Initially, I was India programmer for a section called International Forum of New Cinema at the Berlin Film Festival, which is a more experimental section. I recommended a range of good Indian films in various Indian languages to them; some they selected; others they passed on to other sections that often also selected the film, for example Panorama, and the Generation section for children and young adults, etc.

Since I was sourcing films that were being selected by most of the major festival sections, the main festival soon gave me a contract as India Consultant, then as South Asia Consultant. Now I'm the Berlin Film Festival's Delegate for South Asia, covering seven countries--India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan. I pre-select and recommend films from all these countries, and a selection committee in Berlin makes the final decisions. So that's how I got into programming and curating. You know, one thing led to another.

In 2004, I had two important curating assignments. One was for the World Social Forum in Mumbai, where I was commissioned to curate films on themes like poverty, war, labour,

migrants, etc. People attended from all over the world. Later that year, I also curated Made by Women, a festival of some of the finest women directors from around the world. Women directors are the buzz-word today, but we did it nearly 20 years ago. It was organised by a non-profit called Point of View, that amplifies women's voices through multiple media. The package travelled all over India and was warmly received. I'm now Vice Chairperson on the board of Point of View, and we celebrated our 25th year in 2021. So, I've had 25 years of a parallel life in communications on development issues, gender, water, health, education—that few know about.

I look at hundreds of films from all the seven countries—as well as South Asian diaspora films -- and I recommend the best films to the festival. So, my programming is pre-selecting the best of the latest South Asian films made in that particular year. That is programming. But curating is where you come up with a specific theme, and you find films that fit that subject. So, for example, I curated Indian Expressionism for the TIFF Cinematheque, the year-round programming home of the Toronto International Film Festival, in Toronto, Canada, in 2012. I explored the influence of German Expressionism on Indian cinema over half a century, including both German and Indian archival films, such as Josef von Sternberg's German classic 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, which was remade by V. Shantaram as *Pinjra* in Marathi in 1972, but completely Indianised. The films were magnificent, and the package was very well received. Later the International Film Festival Kerala also invited me to curate a version of the package for them.

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*What are your observations on how festivals or festival circuits have evolved since you started your career?*

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Quite significantly. I think it is very revealing to look at how the festivals have responded to Indian films, and how the place of Indian cinema and South Asian cinema has evolved at a major festival like the Berlinale.

When I first worked with the Berlinale, as I said, I worked for the International Forum of New Cinema, which is the experimental section, and independently curated by the Arsenal Institute of Film and Video Art, Berlin. And I found it fascinating that they would choose films like Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1999), or Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (2000)—some of the most mainstream Indian films, in addition to our arthouse films. On top of it, I found it really weird and funny that they were playing them in the Forum, the most experimental, cutting-edge section of the festival! Dorothee Wenner explained that they did it to highlight how extraordinary Indian cinema is: Indian cinema is the only film industry in the whole world where Hollywood is barely 10% of the Indian film market.

Hollywood is a global giant that has destroyed what are called national cinemas worldwide in Korea, France, everywhere. Many countries have film protectionist policies in either a positive or negative way, to protect their own industry against the onslaught of Hollywood. So even in Korea, traditionally, they've had a certain number of fixed theatre days of the year reserved for screening only Korean films, otherwise they will be swamped by only Hollywood films. In France, they have massive protection of French cinema, through a huge number of government subsidies and infrastructure for the production, distribution and exhibition of French and other language films. A lot of European cinema

is majorly state funded or subsidised, and if they don't have state funding, their film industries will practically collapse. There is hardly any private cinema, made without any government subsidy or support. Whereas the Indian film industry is almost entirely privately funded. You might find some stray films that managed to get government funds, but these are negligible. So Indian cinema is a very resilient and very powerful film industry, of which we should be proud.

And India has imposed no protectionist controls to protect or support Indian cinema against Hollywood, so its achievements are extraordinary. We haven't imposed controls on Hollywood in terms of, say, limiting screening theatres for Hollywood, etc. And Hollywood has been operating for 100+ years in India, with their massive budgets. Their marketing budgets alone can be much bigger than the entire budget of an Indian film. And they have star directors like Steven Spielberg and big stars like Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks, George Clooney, whoever. And after all of that, after 100 years, and no controls, they're still only 10% of the Indian market. So that is a tremendous tribute to the resilience and the power of Indian cinema and the absolute love that the Indian public has for its own cinema—Bollywood (mainstream Hindi cinema) and the other regional cinemas.

Whereas in Korea, France, Germany, and worldwide, people are often watching more Hollywood films than their own national cinemas. So, these controls, positive and negative, are meant to nurture the domestic, national cinemas. But in India, we love Indian films anyway, including Bollywood. So, it's a David-Goliath story, a tribute to the triumph of Indian cinema over Hollywood on our own turf. That's what they wanted to showcase in the Forum at the Berlinale.

That's how mainstream Indian cinema also started off in the Forum section at the Berlinale, when I first started working with them. Now we regularly have Indian and Bollywood films in the prestigious Berlinale Special section, which is for important new films, which can also have gala premieres with glamorous stars. For example, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi* starring Alia Bhatt, was in the Berlinale Special Gala in 2022; Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy*, starring Alia Bhatt and Ranveer Singh, and Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* with Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Sanya Malhotra, were also in the same section (both in 2019). All three films premiered at the spectacular Friedrichstadt Palast, with nearly 1900 seats! There's no active Indian cinema that big, as far as I know. So that's how the place of Indian and South Asian cinema has evolved and risen, from the Forum to the Berlinale Special at the Berlinale over the last 25 years or so.

The Forum section has showcased perhaps the greatest number of independent Indian and South Asian films, and been a major supporter of our cinema over the decades. They have included for example, Amit Masurkar's *Newton* (with Rajkumar Rao), Haobam Paban Kumar's *Loktak Lairembee* ("Lady of the Lake", Manipuri) and Ameer Sulthan's *Paruthiveeran* (Tamil, with Karthi) and films from many other languages.

Films have also moved up from the Forum to many other sections. Apart from the Berlinale Special, they have moved to the Panorama section, which is for artistic films, but also includes LGBT films on gay/homosexual themes. So, a lot of the films of, for example, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, including *Mondo Meyer Upakhyan* ("A Tale of a Naughty Girl", Bengali), have been shown in the Panorama: his films have not dealt with gay themes as

such, but are purely artistic. Also Bassam Tariq's *Mogul Mowgli* starring Riz Ahmed, and Dechen Roder's *Honeygiver Among the Dogs* (Bhutan, in Dzongkha) were in the Panorama. We've also had Pushpendra Singh's exquisite *Laila aur Satt Geet* ("The Shepherdess and the Seven Songs", Gojri/Hindi) in the recently introduced Encounters section (2020), which is for aesthetically daring works from independent, innovative filmmakers, a counterpoint and complementary section to the Competition section. India has also had a number of films in the Generation section for children and young adults (including many award winners), including Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dhanak* ("Rainbow"), Umesh Kulkarni's *Vihir* ("The Well", Marathi), Avinash Arun's *Killa* ("Fort", Marathi, Crystal Bear winner), Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* ("Wild", Marathi), Jayaraj's *Ottaal* ("Trap", Malayalam, Crystal Bear winner), Rima Das's *Bulbul Can Sing* (Assamese). In Berlinale Shorts, we have had Silver Bear winner Sidharth Sinha's *Udhedh Bun* ("Un-ravel", Bhojpuri), and Suba Sivakumaran's *Enakkum Oru Per* ("I Too Have a Name", Tamil). But the last film India had in the Competition section at the Berlinale was Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Charachar* (1994). India has a similar story in the Competition section at other A-list festivals too.

We've also had a rich array of South Asian films at the Berlin Film Festival, and you see how some of them are homegrown voices, while others struggle to get international co-productions to find a voice. These include Deepak Rauniyar's *Highway* (Nepal, Panorama, 2012), Rajesh Prasad Khatri's *Jaalgedi-A Curious Girl* (Nepal, France, Generation K Plus, 2018), Surya Shahi's *Wheels on the Bus* (Nepal, Generation K Plus 2022), and Deepak Rauniyar's *Four Nights* (USA, Mexico, Nepal, Berlinale Shorts, 2022); Naeem Mohaiemen's *Jole Dobe Na* (Those who do not Drown, India, USA, Japan, Sweden; director is Bangladeshi, Forum Expanded 2022), and Mohaiemen's *Abu Ammar is Coming* (Bangladesh, Lebanon, UK, Forum Expanded 2016); Jamil Dehlvi's *Immaculate Conception* (UK/Pakistan, Panorama, 1992), and Khalid Gill's *Chan di Chummi* (Kiss the Moon), Pakistan/Germany, Panorama 2009); Juwansher Haidary's *Baba* (Afghanistan, Forum 2019), Latif Ahmadi's *Hamas-e-eshq* (Epic of Love, Afghanistan, Forum 2019), Qader Tahiri and Sher Mohammad Khara's *Khan-e-tarikh*, House of History, Afghanistan, Forum 2019), Hassan Fazili's *Midnight Traveller* (US/UK/Qatar/Canada, Afghan director, Panorama 2019), and Yosef Baraki's *Mina Walking* (Canada, Afghanistan, Generation 14 Plus, 2015); Pradeepan Raveendran's *A Mango Tree in the Front Yard* (Tamil, France, originally Sri Lankan director, Berlinale Shorts, 2009); *Matangi/Maya/MIA* by Steve Loveridge with Maya Arulpragasam (USA/UK/Sri Lanka; MIA is originally from Sri Lanka, Panorama 2018), and Sharlene Bamboat's *If From Every Tongue It Drips* (Canada, UK, Sri Lanka, Forum Expanded 2022); Dechen Roder's *Honeygiver among the Dogs* (Bhutan, Panorama 2017), Dechen Roder's *Loe Sum Choe Sum* (3 year, 3 month retreat, Bhutan, Berlinale Shorts, 2015), and Tashi Gyeltshen's *The Red Phallus* (Bhutan, Germany, Nepal, Generation 14 Plus, 2019).

The Berlin Film Festival has also been supporting films and filmmakers via the Berlinale Talents, Berlinale CoProduction Market and European Film Market. The Berlinale CoProduction Market (COPM) has supported many South Asian projects, including Ritesh Batra's *Dabba/The Lunchbox* (India, COPM/Talent Project Market 2012), Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls* (2022), Rubaiyat Hossain's *The Difficult Bride*, Bangladesh (2022) and Bijon's *Paradise* (Bangladesh-Germany, 2019) and Dipankar Sen Gupta's *Janani--The Mother* (Bangladesh, COPM/TPM 2006).

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The Berlinale Film Festival also has the World Cinema Fund that supports films in nations with relatively poor film infrastructure worldwide; in South Asia it includes Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Mongolia. These funds went among others, to Shahrbanoo Sadat's *Parwareshgah/The Orphanage* (Afghanistan, 2017), Min Bahadur Bham's *Kalo Pothi/ Black Hen* (Nepal-Germany, 2014), Kamar Ahmad Simon's *Shikolbaha/ Iron Stream* (Bangladesh-Germany, 2017), Rubaiyat Hossain's *The Difficult Bride* (Bangladesh, 2022), Shahorkh Bikaran and Ilyas Yourish's *Kamay* (Afghanistan-Germany, 2021), *The Road to Mandalay* by Midi Z, Myanmar, Myanmar-Germany, 2015), and Lkhagvadulam Purev-Ochir's *Ze* (Mongolia, France, Germany 2021).

Of course, it is still a persistent problem India has faced in many key festivals over the years--we've not been in the competition section, but we've been in other sections of the official selection or in the parallel bar events, etc. But in the last two decades, we've also regularly had Shah Rukh Khan films be wildly popular at Berlin, which is extraordinary, because it does not even have a significant diaspora population as such, unlike London or New York. Yet people come from all over the world and all over Europe come to see his films at the Berlinale. So Shah Rukh Khan's films at the Berlinale have been hugely popular, including *Dil Se*, *Veer Zaara*, *Om Shanti Om*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *Don*, *Don 2*, and *My Name is Khan*. In fact, *Don 2* was an Indo-German coproduction, with backing from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, but unfortunately, it didn't do so well. Shah Rukh's films usually open at the Berlinale in grand theatres, like the Friedrichstadt Palast. I once asked the actor why the Europeans loved him so much. "In the West you have a button for everything," he said. "You press a button for the elevator, a button to make orange juice... I think I am their button to cry." SRK films at the Berlinale are always screened in either the massive Friedrichstadt Palast or the Kino International, both in former East Berlin, because these are the only theatres large enough to hold his massive fan following. In fact, German filmmaker Uli Gaulke once told me, after watching *My Name is Khan* at the Berlinale, "This film is an important handshake between India and the West." He saw it as an important film, fighting global Islamophobia through a popular medium like Bollywood, fronted by a big Bollywood star.

More recently we've had very interesting mainstream films like Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Both were very feminist films. *Gully Boy*, a rap film made by a woman director, is full-on mainstream cinema with stars and songs, yet also very realistic, set in the Dharavi slums, with a woman medical student willing to financially support her rapper boyfriend. So, it's what I call 'mindie' cinema (mainstream + indie cinema). So, it's mainstream with big stars, terrific song and dance, but still borrowing from independent cinema in realistic themes and treatment, not suddenly going off to la-la land, singing in Switzerland, for example. Even *Gangubai Kathiawadi* was very feminist and somewhat mindie – as indie as Bhansali could get, I suppose, given that it's a biopic. I like the mindie space very much. So, I've explained the journey of Indian and South Asian cinema over the years from independent, parallel sections to more high profile, mainstream sections at the Berlinale too.

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*How do you see South Asian films in general making a mark in these top festivals?*

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I've already shared some of the South Asian films that have been at Berlin. Moreover, at the last Cannes Film Festival, South Asia has at least 10 films and projects officially

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selected so far by the 75th Cannes Film Festival. The festival has selected these from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar. The South Asian films include Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* in the Un Certain Regard, Pakistan's first film in Cannes' official selection. Sadiq's *Darling* earlier won the Best Short in Orizzonti at Venice. Shaunak Sen's magnificent documentary *All That Breathes*, that won the Grand Jury Prize (Documentary) at Sundance, was in Cannes' Special Screenings and won L'Oeil d'Or for Best Documentary at Cannes. It is a poetic, political film about two Muslim brothers who save injured black kites in Delhi. Abinash Bikram Shah's *Lori* ("Melancholy of my Mother's Lullabies", Nepal, 14 min), in the Short Films Competition, explores lullabies to question a deeply patriarchal society. Pratham Khurana's *Nauha* ("Eve of a Eulogy", 26 min), from Whistling Woods International, India, that explores the relationship between a senior citizen and his care-giver, is in La Cinef (La Cinefondation) section for film school entries.

There are also four South Asian film projects officially selected in various sections. These include three projects in La Fabrique Cinema (part of Les Cinemas du Monde/Institut Francais, that helps develop projects) –Gourab Mullick's *Starfruits*, produced by Umesh Kulkarni (India), Seemab Gul's *Haven of Hope, Panakhana*, produced by Abid Aziz Merchant (Pakistan), and Abinash Bikram Shah's *Elephants in the Fog*, produced by Anup Poudel (Nepal). Sein Lyan Tun's *The Beer Girl in Yangon*, from Myanmar, produced by John Badalu (Indonesia), is in the L'Atelier section. Midi Z, the Burmese-Taiwanese filmmaker, whose films have been in the Cannes, Berlin and Venice film festivals, is Patron, a mentor, at La Fabrique this year. So, these are officially selected in different section of Cannes. Plus there are films that are selected by Film Bazaar, but they are not part of the official selection; they are in the market section.

We have always had a lot of film talent in all the South Asian countries. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and Bhutan. But it's just that Bollywood (mainstream cinema in Hindi) is such a big elephant in the room, that audiences have for decades mostly ignored even Indian films in any other regional language like Malayalam, Tamil, Bengali or Marathi films, and never given them the same respect: Bollywood was the be-all and end-all.

Somehow the media was always a part of that game. So, for example, even when they reported on India's National Film Awards, which also gives awards in every Indian language and in some 52 categories, the media would highlight mainly the Bollywood talent, even if a Tamil or Marathi film has won Best Film or Best Director.

India makes films in 55 languages and dialects, and that's what makes our cinema so rich and unique. That's more than twice the 24 official languages of the whole of the European Union, in just one country. So, if you're only looking at Hindi cinema, and ignoring the best films from India in 54 languages, then there's tremendous cinematic poverty here, bias and short-sightedness. When the media is so biased, their biases are passed on to the audience, which internalises this pro-Bollywood bias. That is why there has been, until recently, a tremendous ignorance and lack of interest in the regional cinemas in India, and by extension, South Asian cinema of our neighbours. But South Asia has a rich history of cinema, that we ignore and that is entirely our loss. It is likewise outside Bollywood, we do not always celebrate regional film directors beyond a few major star directors, including Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Ratnam and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. So, a lot

of local regional talent is ignored. Bollywood is like a big bully in the region, just as Hollywood does globally.

Also, South Asian independent filmmakers struggle to find home audiences for their films: everyone is busy watching Bollywood or Hollywood, few will enthusiastically support local films in local languages. That's a struggle worldwide. But lately not only have a lot of younger talents being finding their own voices, but because they are pushed to the corner, they are establishing their own international linkages to make their voices heard. So, for example, the Busan International Film Festival has always been very encouraging, with a very generous selection of films from South Asia including all over India, and a host of other opportunities, including the Asian Cinema Fund, Asian Project Market, BIFF Asian Film Academy, etc.

Full disclosure: I worked closely with Mr. Kim Ji-Seok, co-founder, deputy director and the executive programmer of Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), who passed away in 2017: I was India Consultant to the Busan Film Festival for about 12 years, approximately 1996-2008: as well as India Consultant to the Asian Film Market for a few years around then.

I've been able to support Asian films through multiple initiatives—festival programming, script mentoring, pitch mentoring, juries, selection on film funding bodies for films, scripts and projects, both fiction and documentaries, etc. One is the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA, Australia), given to the best Asian films in 70 nations. I've been associated with them for nine years, mostly selecting features, documentaries, animation films on the APSA Nominations Council, and/or recommending South Asian films to them. Also, I've been a Script Mentor on the Asia Pacific Screen Lab (part of APSA, Australia) for emerging Asian filmmakers. My protegee Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined* (Singapore) won the Golden Leopard at Locarno Film Festival, 2018, and protégé Mohanad Hayal's *Haifa Street*, Iraq, won the New Currents Award, Busan Film Festival, 2019, and I was absolutely thrilled for them).

I've been a Script Mentor/Consultant on script labs worldwide, and also on the selection committees of top film funds and script funds, in the US, Europe and Asia. These include the Sundance Institute Screenwriters' Lab India, Venice Film Festival's Biennale College Cinema, IFF Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund, Locarno Open Doors, Asia Pacific Screen Lab (Australia), Berlinale Spotlight on Bangladesh, Dhaka International Film Festival's West Meets East Screenplay Lab, Dhaka Doc Lab, Sultana's Dream: Breaking the Silence: Script Mentor for all-women film lab for 16 women addressing sexual abuse, Dhaka, Bangladesh 2022; Clinic South Asian Lab, Kathmandu, Nepal, etc. Seemab Gul's (UK) *Panah Khana* (Haven of Hope), produced by Abid Aziz Merchant (Pakistan), was selected by the Venice Film Festival's Biennale College Cinema 2021-22, and Abinash Bikram Shah's LGBT-themed *Elephants in the Fog*, produced by Anup Poudel, Nepal, was selected by the Hubert Bals Fund.

There's also the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Hong Kong - Asia Film Financing Forum (HAF) Project Market and Asian Film Awards, organised by the Tokyo, Busan and Hong Kong International Film Festivals, Asian film markets and more. Also, co-production platforms like the National Film Development Corporation's (NFDC's)

Film Bazaar in Goa, India have also offered international co-production labs for South Asian films.

I've observed how filmmaking has evolved in South Asia. Busan has established a presence as the 'Cannes of Asia' through its film selection and multiple film support initiatives. So, while earlier South Asian filmmakers were mostly dependent on Western funding and resources, many South Asian filmmakers from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc, have benefited from Korean opportunities: they have a close Korean connection, some have studied at a film school or done other programmes in Korea, and are fluent in Korean.

Secondly, a lot of the younger generation of South Asian filmmakers have also studied film overseas or are what I call 'fluid diaspora.' For example, in Pakistan, gifted filmmakers include Anam Abbas and Hamza Bangash, both of whom are Pakistani Canadian. So, they've lived in Canada for many years, and have access to different resources, funding, producers, etc, but choose to make films set and shot in Pakistan. They want to tell Pakistani stories because that's where their roots are. So, it makes for a different kind of filmmaking and it finds its own festival opportunities and outlets.

Thirdly, diaspora filmmakers are finding South Asian producers: again, in Pakistan, for example, the Karachi-based producer Abid Aziz Merchant has produced, among others, the films of Pakistani-American Iram Parveen Bilal (*I'll Meet You There*, shot in the US) and British-Pakistani Seemab Gul (shot in Pakistan: her short *Mulaqat/Sandstorm* was at the Venice Film Festival). Short films produced by Carol Ann Noronha, Pakistani woman producer, and directed by Hamza Bangash, have also been at the Locarno (Dia, 1978), London (*Stray Dogs*) and Toronto film festivals (*Bhai*).

In Sri Lanka there's a trinity of globally acclaimed filmmakers--Prasanna Vithanage, Asoka Handagama and Vinutha Jayasundara. Vimukthi's features have all been at Cannes or Venice Film Festivals. Indians hardly know their work. But Vinutha made an Indo-Sri Lankan film called *Chatrak* that was at Cannes, which was shot in Kolkata, in Bengali, a language he hardly knows at all. So, people are looking at very interesting, different ways of filmmaking storytelling, which are beyond the traditional.

*How does one get their film out there for the world to see and appreciate? What is the best way to break into the festival circuit? What do you look at when selecting films for the festivals?*

I'll answer the second question first.

It's actually a very difficult question to answer because we're dealing with art and not, say, bricks. Art is very personal and very subjective. So, what I look for is a film that surprises me, that says something interesting, that says something insightful about a subject I may or may not know about. Or sometimes it can also be that a film talks about a subject that's familiar but is very politically daring.

How to get your film seen at festivals... it's a long and tricky journey. And the simplest thing would be for you to look at two YouTube videos where I have already addressed this

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topic at great length. I've compressed my 25 years of knowledge on the festival circuit into very, very basic easy tips for a filmmaker to follow so that one can make a simple template which a filmmaker can follow through his or her entire career. My two YouTube lecture links are hosted by WhiteBirdTrails ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_k97QgQnQl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_k97QgQnQl)) and by the Dhaka Intl Film Festival/Rainbow Film Society ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpYC\\_9kx-tY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpYC_9kx-tY)).

So, there may be a lot of festivals that may not be obvious to you, but which are highly regarded within the festival world. You know there is Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, London and Busan. Then there's FIAPF (International Federation of Film Producers Association) which organises top accredited lists of festivals for fiction films, documentaries, animation, etc. You have readymade lists of festivals to apply to there. They may include film festivals that may not appear high profile to you like the Karlovy Vary festival in the Czech Republic but they're very, very prestigious.

Then look at top festivals and awards in Asia, including Busan. Also awards like the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA, Australia), HAF in Hong Kong, etc. Then you can also look at overseas Indian/South Asian film festivals, like the London Indian Film Festival, New York Indian Film Festival, Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, which looks at South Asian films, Tasveer South Asian Film Festival in Seattle, Chicago SAFF, etc. There's the River to River Indian Film Festival in Florence, and also festivals in Stuttgart and Melbourne.

Then you can look at international film festivals in South Asia. For example the IFF Kerala, Mumbai Film Festival, IFFI Goa, Kolkata Film Festival, Dhaka International Film Festival; and there are festivals in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, etc.

Then you look at what fits into your budget because a lot of them have screening fees that you may or may not be able to afford. You should always politely request a fee waiver. It's important not to be a pest and you can ask maybe once at the most, but not beyond. That's a systematic way of making a film festival strategy template. So that's the basic formula--if it can be called a formula. Just add 5% additional customised festivals eg human rights festivals if you're dealing with that subject, or LGBT festivals if you have a gay theme, etc. And you're set.

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*As a first-time producer, if one is producing an independent film on a shoestring budget, how should they plan their foray into festivals and the co-production market? Do they need to make a strategy from the script stage or during post-production?*

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There are different options. I always say that, for example, for a festival like Berlin, there are many ways to get into the big party going on inside. So to make your film and get selected is one way. But a lot of the top festivals have different gates by which you can enter, all leading to the same party inside. For example the Berlin Film Festival has the Berlinale Talents, which is for young and upcoming filmmakers. So you would have made short films or one feature film, for example, but you have to check the eligibility criteria. Once you're selected, there are many mentoring and networking opportunities, and after that, the festival itself will watch out for your films and career.

There is also the Berlinale Co-production Market where, if you already have a producer on

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

board and you meet the criteria, you can meet many international co-producers and try to get your film funded. There is also the Berlinale World Cinema Fund, which is specifically funding films mainly in countries where the filmmaking infrastructure is very weak or filmmaking conditions are extraordinary difficult. Therefore, India is not eligible, because it has one of the most resilient film industries in the world. But all our neighbours in South Asia are eligible, for example Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, etc. and of course other nations worldwide, they are all listed. But since I'm discussing South Asia, I am mentioning only these nations.

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*How are women filmmakers from Asia defying the odds?*

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

Women filmmakers have been finding their own voice since a century, but usually have been overlooked, and not given the same importance and chances as male directors, and that's also a reflection of how our societies are, and how the film industry is. But I think one or two things are making it a little easier for women film talent in a very ironic way. It was the #MeToo movement that actually had women fighting back to stop sexual harassment and abuse, and therefore, by default, people are trying to make up for the systemic abuse and discrimination against women that has been happening for more than a century in film. People are trying to build systemic ways of supporting women's film talent.

A few years ago, a lot of the top film festivals in the world signed a pledge called 50:50 by 2020, which aims to have 50:50, or 50% representation to women filmmakers and talent by 2020, which, of course, has come and gone. No festival is near that, but a lot of festivals including Berlin and Toronto especially, do take it very seriously. I can speak for Berlin, which is extremely serious about it. It is politically very alert and stands for the right principles and values, which is why I feel very grateful to have an opportunity to work with them. At the end of every single festival edition, the Berlinale actually brings out a gender study report. How have we fared in this particular festival edition with respect to gender equality? And what is amazing about the festival is, it is not only concerned about what is the percentage of women filmmakers selected in this year. It's actually looking at the bigger picture. It is, of course, looking at how many women filmmakers were selected in every category-- in the Competition, Encounters, Panorama, Forum, Generation, etc. But also, specifically looking at women's representation throughout, everything that can impact the selection and beyond. Is there a woman festival director? How many women are on the selection committees? How many women are on the jury? How many women are programmers for various territories, etc. So, it's asking for accountability at every stage, because all these other decisions eventually also impact how many films directed by women get selected and get visibility. So, the festival is very conscientious.

The Toronto Film Festival has also been deeply committed to gender parity. It has programs to encourage more women talent, and a lovely campaign called Share Her Journey, where it helps women storytellers through mentoring, networking and other opportunities, for women in front of and behind the camera. Originally a campaign, it is now a regular fixture of the festival. And of course, there's lots of funding or prizes for gender sensitive films and women filmmakers worldwide to encourage women voices as well. Diversity and inclusion are the buzz words, including women, LGBT and BIPOC – black, indigenous, people of colour, etc. So, it is also addressing the problem

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

systemically, which is a very good thing.

I'm also on the Advisory Committee of a ground-breaking research project, "Lights, Camera and Time for Action: Recasting Gender Equality Compliant Hindi Cinema" conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai's School of Media and Cultural Studies (SMCS). The study is funded by the US Consulate Mumbai. It is a systematic, quantitative of gender in Hindi films, both on-screen and behind the screen. 1930 characters from 35 films were analysed for their gender representation on screen, types of roles played by characters in various genders, their occupations and other parameters. The study also explored the most popular departments of film making for women crew members, the levels at which they work and the share of women winning film awards.

Some of the team participated in a MasterClass on 'Breaking the Screen Ceiling: Gender & Work in Hindi Cinema,' based on the TISS study. as part of the International Film Festival of India IFFI Goa in Goa in November 2022. The participants were Rashmi Lamba, Project Lead, Engagement & Advocacy, Dr. Lakshmi Lingam, Dean and Professor, SCMS - TISS, Prof Shilpa Phadke (TISS), filmmaker Pushan Kripalani (director of *Goldfish*, *The Threshold*), and myself. The audience was really engaged and peppered us with questions. More details about the School at [www.smcs.tiss.edu](http://www.smcs.tiss.edu), and Dr. Lakshmi Lingam, Dean & Professor, School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai 400088 (Email: [lakshmil@tiss.edu](mailto:lakshmil@tiss.edu))

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*You have just returned from Nepal at Film Southasia. Can you tell us a bit about the program 'Create, Curate and Collaborate'?*

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

I'd been invited as a panellist to Film Southasia, a superb biennial festival of South Asian documentary films, in Patan, now called Lalitpur, Nepal. It is one of the very, very few festivals in South Asia which actually has a pan-South Asian vision: it shows films only from South Asia, not anywhere else in the world. So South Asia is not the tiny country cousin, it is the main hero of the festival. The panel 'Create, Curate and Collaborate: Making and sharing art during and post-pandemic' looked at strategies of how people were dealing with the pandemic, how people in curating, programming and film festivals, as well as other festivals, coped with the pandemic, what were the lessons learned.

**Vaibhav Ingole**

*How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the festival and how is the festival overcoming those impacts?*

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

The theatrical audience had at one point entirely disappeared during the pandemic, and cannot be assumed to be returning entirely to the theatres once COVID is gone—if it ever leaves us. Two key lessons learned: entertainment is now going to be a substantially online-driven world, and two, it is far wiser for festivals to collaborate than to compete.

So soon after the pandemic started, the Berlin Film Festival was part of a group of about 22 festivals that collaborated on the 'We Are One: A Global Film Festival' that was only online in 2020. It was organised by Tribeca Enterprises and YouTube, and screened about 100 films, co-curated by all the festivals, including Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Karlovy Vary, Sundance, Tribeca, Rotterdam, Jio Mami, etc, available free, on YouTube. From India, the

**Meenakshi  
Shedde**

Jio Mami Mumbai Film Festival sent Prateek Vat's *Eeb Allay Ooo!* (Hindi) and Arun Karthick's *Nasir* (Tamil), both Indian features, and two shorts, Shaan Vyas's *Natkhat* and Atul Mongia's *Awake*. So, people could feel part of the festival, while watching the films from home. Most festivals offered a film -- a feature film or a documentary. The Berlin Film Festival gave a feature film, but also had a fascinating session with Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee in conversation with Japanese director Kore-eda Hirokazu. So we learned first, to collaborate with other festivals, so it becomes a win-win for everybody. Second, it taught us that your main audience may primarily be online. They will come to the theatres, they will come to film festivals, but the larger, long-term audience will probably remain online. So, OTT and streaming platforms streamed films online. And for the first time in our history, Indian films in different regional languages, with English subtitles, found an audience online. You could watch and actually understand Malayalam, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil films, sitting at home. Often, when you saw regional films in the theatres, they would not have English subtitles. Also for the first time, you can easily compare the quality of films in different languages. This is partly supporting the boom of South Indian language films, including *RRR* (Telugu), *KGF-2* (Kannada), etc, and making Bollywood more accountable for what it dishes out.

One of my important learnings also, was how to build an informed and loyal audience by doing a great Q&A after every film, by having a very good moderator. This is something I learned from the Berlin Film Festival. So, I've been moderating for many international festivals over the years. And it's very crucial because it's a free investment with big returns: after the film is screened, you can have a 15-minute Q/A before the next show. This way, you develop a great relationship with the audience by giving them direct access to stars, directors and film talent they could otherwise not access. But the moderator's role is to ask a few crucial questions, whose answer will be helpful and insightful for the audience. Not all questions the audience asks will be bright, so the moderator keeps it on track, so the audience keeps learning about film in a lively way, and it helps build a long-term relationship with the audience.

At the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art (Arsenal Institut für Film und Videokunst), Berlin, which also programs the International Forum of New Cinema and Forum Expanded sections in the Berlinale, and has multiple film activities, their audiences have developed a loyal relationship with the Arsenal over the years. They can curate a film by an obscure filmmaker from Ouagadougou, Bangladesh, Japan or Korea, but they will trust that it is good or interesting, and they will come. It takes 20, 30, 40, 50 years to develop a near-unconditional loyalty of the audience, to reach absolute devotion on both sides.

So, I hope we can develop such an audience taste and loyalty for good cinema, because that will help good independent films to find an audience.

*- May 10, 2022*

2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Vaibhav Ingole (Vaibhav.ingole@gmail.com)** is a filmmaker, screenwriter and producer based in Mumbai, India. He is a fellow at the Busan Asian Film School (AFiS), class of 2022. He is an alumnus of the Scottish Documentary Institute, the Crossing Borders Program conducted by Documentary Campus and the European Documentary Network where his project *Climbing Uphill* was developed in South Korea and was later pitched at Leipzig Networking Days in Germany, Docedge Kolkata and Good Pitch India. Vaibhav has recently co-directed a Korean documentary on Korean war veterans. He has also worked on a documentary with a French production company for Voyage Channel. He will soon work with a Spanish and South Korean production company as an Indian co-producer for an international documentary.



# NANDITA DAS

Actress / Director / Producer

India

Interview by Vaibhav Ingole

Nandita Das has acted in more than 40 feature films in 10 different languages. She made her directorial debut in 2008 with *Firaaq*, which won many accolades and appreciation, both in India and abroad. She was on the jury at the Cannes Film Festival twice (2005 and 2013), and among other honors she has been conferred the Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government. She was the first Indian to be inducted into the Hall of Fame at the International Women's Forum in Washington DC. Nandita's second directorial venture, *Manto*, based on the life and works of the short story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. It was the only Indian film that year screened in the official selection, and then travelled to various festivals around the world. Her first book *Manto & I* chronicles her 6-year long journey of making the film. Both were co-produced by Nandita Das Initiatives (NDI), a company she set up to explore creative ways to tell compelling stories.

NOTE: Nandita Das has agreed to publish the following excerpt from her book *Manto & I* which shares the challenges faced during producing independent films.

## Gathering funds - *Manto*

Finding funds for *Manto* was a huge challenge as a period film about an Urdu writer was not quite the 'flavour of the season'. After several meetings with several producers, I was able to get three on board. I too had to set up my own company at the eleventh hour, the Nandita Das Initiatives (NDI). I have chosen the word 'Initiatives' over 'Productions' as I hope to continue to explore various creative means, other than films, to tell stories that need to be told.

The road to find funds for the film was a roller coaster ride. Aditi Anand, my first assistant on *Firaaq*, who is now a producer, introduced me to Moviemakers, founded by Sameer Dixit and Jatish Varma. While they were a one-film-old company, they seemed genuinely keen to be the main producers of *Manto*. However, good intentions alone aren't enough. To cut a long story short, they were unable to raise the necessary funds and from main producers, became associate producers. The other two investors at the time—HP Studios and Viacom18 Motion Pictures—stepped up to be the main producers.

HP Studios, an endeavour of Hewlett-Packard (HP Inc), had been partnering with creative professionals since their inception in 1939 with their technology. Their first product was used in the film *Fantasia*, a Disney production. However, they had not produced a feature film before *Manto*. During my trips to Cannes I had been meeting several HP executives since 2007, as they were the official partners for the festival. In 2016, I met the then global head of marketing for print, Vikrant Batra, who spontaneously committed to the project. They found a natural connection with the story of a writer, as their tagline was 'The Power of Ink'. They contributed not just in terms of funds but also provided equipment for editing and visual effects, and printed much of the material we needed for production design—old currency, book covers, posters etc.

The next producer to come on board was Viacom18 Motion Pictures. Ajit Andhare, the COO, liked the script instantly but was sceptical about the film being financially viable. He did take time, but finally decided to invest in the film. He and his team believed passionately in *Manto*, though we had our differences about its marketing and distribution. That said, they had complete faith in me and did not interfere at all with the creative process.

The crisis for funds intensified in the middle of the shoot when Moviemakers, as noted, were unable to make good on their commitments. HP and Viacom, who had already increased their investments, were unable to add any more funds. And so, I had to look for another investor. To stick to the schedule, it was imperative that we continued shooting. Only the producers and I knew of the crisis, and we chose not to tell anyone in the team lest it shook their morale.

We took a four-day break, but were back on track, thanks to two friends who stepped in. The two production companies that stepped in were the newly formed FilmStoc and Film Karavan, producers who had been distributing films on digital platforms for a long time. I was truly overwhelmed by their generosity and unconditional support. Both transferred the required funds instantly, without any questions or paperwork. After much back and forth, I returned the funds Film Karavan had loaned and decided to go with FilmStoc.

Namrata Goyal, the founder of Filmstoc, became the third producer and the second main investor in the film, after HP.

We also received some small funding from French Government agencies that support independent international films - Aide aux Cinémas du Monde - CNC - Institut Français. In 2016, when I went to Cannes to meet potential producers, I met Sandrine Brauer and Marie Masmonteil who showed great enthusiasm for the script and facilitated the funding. Their company, En Compagnie des Lamas was credited as a co-producer along with the participation of the French funding agencies. Nawaz played Manto for one rupee, which he refused to take, making me indebted to him -- just like Manto was to his beloved city of Bombay! So when his brother Shamas Nawab Siddiqui, asked that their company, Magic If be credited as a co-producer, I of course agreed.

In India, often the producers are primarily investors, although the role actually involves much more than just funding the film. Therefore, NDI was set up to manage the on ground realities of producing the film. As it was an afterthought, there was really nobody in it except me! But I, along with the executive producer Sanjeevkumar Nair and his team, and Associate Producer Nirang Desai, managed to take over the responsibility. While in *Firaaq*, I did end up doing a lot of production work, *Manto* was the first film that I formally produced. I put together the best cast and crew that I could, within the funds we had. I used up all my goodwill! If the director is the mother of the film, the producer is the other parent. Increasingly, producers are beginning to understand the importance of their role.

## Marketing and Distribution – *Manto*: The Business of ‘Selling’

It is a known fact that ‘marketing a product is as important as the product itself’. I admit while this is a necessary evil, I detest the idea of seeing a film as a product. And having to ‘sell’ it, is by far the most painful phase of filmmaking. But I had decided that I would do whatever it took to make the film accessible. I really wanted to share the story. So, just as I was beginning my pre-production in early 2017, the editor of *India Today* asked me to do a short film for the India Today Conclave. Despite my hectic schedule, I decided to do it as I thought it would be a good way to introduce Saadat Hasan Manto. Also I wanted to engage with the issues of the time, for which I was finding little time as the film had taken precedence over all my other commitments.

I took some parts of the *Manto* script and put them together as a short film and called it ‘In Defence of Freedom’. It was a good exercise in bringing the crew together and in transforming Nawaz into Manto. The minute the short film was online, it received a lot of attention, both from viewers and the media. The only downside was that some thought it to be the trailer of the feature film that we were about to shoot! And that created some confusion.

At the time it seemed crazy, but right in the middle of the shoot we had the opportunity to unveil *Manto* at the Cannes Film Festival. It was a good opportunity for us to reach out to international press and distribution. So we made a trailer of the film with the footage we

had shot thus far. Nawaz, Rasika and I, along with the main producers, went to Cannes for the *Manto* event. Apart from showing the trailer, Nawaz read a short excerpt from Manto’s original works and I read out the translation. The overwhelming response boosted our spirits and also gave us a short break before we went back to complete the shoot.

By the time the film was to release in India, it had garnered a fair amount of attention at festivals and media awareness was high. But *Manto* is perhaps a good example of how preconceived notions and biases impact the fate of a film. Decisions for marketing and distributing films are often taken on the basis of focus group analyses. The sample sizes are small and questions are standardized for all films, irrespective of their content, form and genre as they are mainly used for mainstream films. The results of this process are often flawed and merely reinforce the biases of the marketing and distribution teams.

To my utter surprise, instead of using hard data from millions of searches for *Manto* on Google, or its social media mentions, the team based its distribution strategy on those skewed ‘results’. For instance, the Google trends that measure the number of searches for any subject, clearly showed that the positive buzz for *Manto* was higher than all the films being released at that time. I thought this finding would play a critical role in deciding the number of screens and how the film should be marketed. For the distribution team, *Manto* was a ‘niche’ film that should have a small release and therefore limited marketing.

At least following this logic, I assumed that the marketing would be designed to appeal to that ‘niche’ audience. Instead, it was a mishmash of strategies. On the one hand the film had minimal exposure beyond the editorial interest that the media had. No hoardings, barely any ads in the media, no event for trailer or music launch—none of the usual filmi hoopla that we are bombarded with, when there is a new release in the offing.

On the other hand, much of the marketing material was created for a mainstream young audience. But it was not in the way I had imagined—a music video was shot with Nawaz mouthing some of the film dialogues and Raftaar, a popular rapper, sang his own lyrics inspired by Manto’s thoughts. While I confess that a lot of young people liked it and knew of the film through it, I am not sure if that translated in them going to the theatres. Moreover, we already had four wonderful songs that were showered with enough praise and were from the film. I am not a purist, but it did bother me that a rap song of 2018 was being used to market a film set in the 1940s. I think the marketing strategy ended up displeasing both constituencies.

Finally, came the day of the release, 21 September 2018. Having spent more than six years on the film, I wasn’t prepared for a bumpy start. It was only through social media that I found out that the first-day-first-shows were cancelled all over the country. It was because of some ‘technical glitch’, though later the distributors themselves told me that it was due to ‘inadequate paperwork’. People had taken the morning off on a work day to see the film. They, along with me and our *Manto* team were deeply disappointed.

The film was screened in fewer than 500 theatres in all of India. Just to put things in perspective, an average Bollywood film gets more than 2,000 screens, while big ones like *Kesari* and *Thugs of Hindostan* got more than 5,000 screens. Moreover the selection of

those 500 screens was disappointing. Cities like Srinagar and Amristar, places where Manto was originally from, and grew up in, had no screenings. People who were anxiously waiting to watch the film felt let down. All of Kerala, where cinema and literature are celebrated had one screening, while Gujarat had too many. The logic was difficult to comprehend.

In the cities that had the few shows, the timings were odd—often too early in the morning or too late at night. Despite social media buzz and word of mouth, if the screenings are not close to one's home and at convenient timings, people usually do not end up going to the theatres to watch the film. It is the first weekend that determines how long the film will run and how far it will travel. All analyses for why a film failed or succeeded are done in retrospect. And seldom are the real factors that could have actually made a difference considered. A hit or a miss are owed either to the quality of the film or its commercial potential.

The sad truth is that many films suffer as a result of inadequate or misdirected marketing and distribution strategies. And then they get labelled as 'festival films that can't do well at the box-office'. I realize that the tussle between a director's passion for a film and the reality of business is eternal. But I feel the need to share the filmmaker's side of the story as the audience has the right to know why some films reach them and some don't. While I am enthusiastic about new digital platforms that eliminate mediators between films and their audiences, it is not in public interest that independent voices are pushed out from theatres.

Having said that, I do think that together, we can break this vicious cycle. If filmmakers found ways to tell diverse and authentic stories and audiences saw them in theatres, making them a success, the mediators would have to let go of their prejudices and submit to the real 'demand and supply' theory that they hold so dear. My assertion is not merely as a filmmaker, but also as a viewer and someone who has championed independent cinema at large. So, while filmmakers battle the 'system', maybe the change can start with the audiences. Perhaps, if they were made aware of how difficult it is for an independent film to even make it to a theatre (not so) near them, they would go the extra mile to support it.

Many assume that the educated and affluent class understand the nuances of 'niche' films while the person on the street doesn't. Often I have heard people saying that some films are for the 'classes' and not the 'masses'. Time and again, both as an actor and director, I have seen reactions from the 'masses', who connect with films without prejudice or the baggage of intellectualizing it. I asked my driver to watch the first screening of *Manto*, organised for the cast and crew. A man who spoke very little in the six years he has been working with me, suddenly poured out his emotions, 'In all times honest people suffer. Nobody understands them.' His big question was, 'Why is there so much violence in the world?' For me, these two reactions summed up the essence of the film. I felt like my intent had reached him. And this is not an isolated example, but one of the many responses that have come flooding. At the end of the book, I have taken the liberty of sharing some of the reactions that have warmed my heart.

Cinema will always remain an art and not a science and therefore, no one can claim that

they know just too well what will 'work' and what won't. Independent cinema is tough to make and tougher to market. The ability of digital platforms to break the confines of festivals and the economics of large theatrical release, is a welcome development. I was delighted when *Manto* started streaming on Netflix on 1 December 2018. Almost every single day, I get a message from someone watching the film somewhere in the world. I find that despite the fact that *Manto* is rooted in a very particular time and place, the overwhelming response from diverse audiences has assured me that it has universal resonance. With the film on Netflix, viewers have had an intimate experience watching it. But the collective yet personal experience of watching a film in a dark cinema hall is unparalleled, and not just a romantic notion. I strongly believe that independent cinema too deserves both - the theatrical and the digital space.



# WREGAS BHANUTEJA & ADIPATI DOLKEN

Director / Actor

Indonesia

Interview by Astrid Josephine Johanna (Astrid Saerong)

Wregas Bhanuteja was born in Jakarta on October 20, 1992. He has directed several short films, such as *Lemantun* (2014), which was awarded the best film at XXI Short Film Festival 2015. His debut in international film festivals was with *Lembusura* (2015) in the Berlin International Film Festival short film competition. In 2016, his short film *Prenjak* (2016) was awarded best film in La Semaine de la Critique Cannes and also won best film at Piala Citra Festival Film Indonesia 2016. His recent short film, *Tak Ada yang Gila di Kota Ini*, is adapted from Eka Kurniawan's short story. It was in competition at Sundance Film Festival 2020 and awarded Piala Citra Festival Film Indonesia 2019 for Best Short Film. His feature film debut, *The Photocopier* (Penyalin Cahaya) was in the New Currents Competition at the 2021 Busan International Film Festival, and was awarded 12 Piala Citra in Festival Film Indonesia 2021.

Adipati Koesmadji, better known as Adipati Dolken (born in Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia on August 19, 1991) is an Indonesian actor. Adipati gained prominence when he appeared in a supporting role on the soap opera *Kepompong* (2008 to 2009). He was later cast in *Putih Abu-Abu dan Sepatu Kets* (White-Grey and Athletic Shoes), his first collaboration with the film's director Nayato Fio Nuala, who later directed him in *18+* (2010) and its sequel, *18++ Forever Love* (2012). In 2012, he starred alongside Maudy Ayunda and Surya Saputra in *Malaikat Tanpa Sayap* (An Angel with No Wings). Later, he co-starred with Maudy Ayunda once again alongside Reza Rahadian in *Perahu Kertas* (Paper Boats), which was adapted from the novel of the same name by its author Dewi "Dee" Lestari. In 2013, he appeared in the historical film *The Clerics* (Sang Kiai), where his performance garnered him the Citra Award for Best Supporting Actor at the 2013 Indonesian Film Festival. At the age of 22, he was one of the youngest award recipients at the festival. After that, he has played in many roles in Indonesian films and worked with many directors, from Rako Prijanto to Edwin. He also appeared in *The Man from the Sea*, a Japanese-Indonesian-French co-production directed by Koji Fukada. Adipati was cast in the film, shot in Aceh, alongside fellow Indonesian actress Sekar Sari and Japanese actors Dean Fujioka, Mayu Tsuruta, and Taiga.

NOTE FROM INTERVIEWER: This interview was conducted as a roundtable discussion, in order to have an in-depth talk with young Indonesian filmmakers of various job descriptions who are striving to establish themselves in the industry. I have known Adipati since 2016, when he played a role for Edwin's film *Posesif*. As for Wregas, I known him since 2020 where I helped him as his 2nd AD for his debut feature film *The Photocopier*.

Astrid Saerong

*How did you first get started in your career?*

Adipati Dolken

I've been in the industry since I was 16 years old, without a clear picture of how the film industry works. I had never watched any films before, and when I did soap operas and film for television (FTV), I had no knowledge about acting or how the shooting processes work. Hell, I didn't even know the difference between soap operas, FTVs, or film. I was traumatized the first time I shot my FTV project because I didn't understand anything, and I could only read the words in the script. The director was even mad at me and spitting bad words at me in front of everyone. But then I could understand that in the process of making a film, many people's money, energy, and credibility are at stake. I navigated the situation and began learning.

My first feature films are *Abu-Abu Putih dan Sepatu Kets*, *18+*, and *Pocong Keliling*. All directed by Nayato. I didn't even know what a proper film production was like when I did these three films. I don't think I got appropriate training since, at that time, the Indonesian film industry didn't really care about the quality of films they produced. They only cared about the audience count. I only got my script when we were shooting, with only 14 crews working and only two reading sessions. But then come my fourth film, *Malaikat Tanpa Sayap*, directed by Rako Prijanto. In this fourth film, I learned the proper film production processes, learned how to become a serious actor, and started to like the film industry. This production changed my mindset about the industry. Hanung Bramantyo watched *Malaikat Tanpa Sayap* and offered me a role in *Perahu Kertas*, a film I consider a breakthrough in my career as an actor.

Wregas  
Bhanuteja

I watched *Perahu Kertas* with my family and I really like your character and how you played it. One of my cousins was obsessed with you and that film. I'm surprised that you started without an acting school background or even knowledge of film production. Unlike Adipati, I have always wanted to become a film director since I was in the third grade of junior high school. In the beginning, I felt like I was a guy with no talents. And in that third grade, there was a film competition for the Independence Day event in my school. In the beginning, I was the actor in this competition, but I interfered with my director with a lot of comments and suggestions. I felt like being behind the camera would be more fun for me.

My high school had an extracurricular activity for film, and I joined it and started making more films. One of the short films I produced at that time was selected for a national high school student film competition. That was when I met Jason Iskandar. Jason Iskandar's film, *Indonesia Bukan Negara Islam*, impressed me so much, and it won the competition. Finally, I decided that I wanted to study film in college at Jakarta Art Institute, although my parents were against it because they thought film people were all drug abusers. I think I had to make 10 short films before I could finally convince my parents.

Astrid Saerong

*What and who inspires you in the Indonesian film industry?  
Who helped you to build your career?*

Adipati Dolken

In my early career, I was in a production with actor Tio Pakusadewo. It was supposed to be a reading schedule that day, but suddenly Tio wanted to meet me in Puncak. There he told me many techniques for acting. How to read the script and act the character on

**Adipati Dolken**

camera. He told me to close my eyes and ask myself, “What is your character’s name?”; “What is he doing in the story?”; “What’s his purpose?”. Those moments have been engraved in my mind until now. It helped me to focus and delve deeper into my character, thanks to Tio. Although he has a hardened personality, he loves to share his knowledge. For me, he’s an important person in my career.

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

I watched Garin Nugroho’s film *Love is in a Slice of Bread*, where Tio Pakusadewo was cast, and I think that film is really absurd. This is why Garin Nugroho doesn’t believe that the 1990’s – the era of the film *Kuldesak* – was the death period of Indonesian cinema. He cannot accept that term because he continues to make films such as *A Poet*, *Angin Rumput Savana*, etc. Those films were selected in festivals such as Berlin, Venice, and so on. Garin’s works made me more interested in filmmaking, especially *Opera Jawa*. From his works, I feel that film is a versatile medium and can be explored in various forms, even if the methods can be considered absurd. Also, Rudi Soedjarwo’s *9 Naga* is a film that makes me realize that film can carry emotion with music, and that work is a film that can make me cry. From that experience, I felt that film is a medium that can affect your emotions, and I wanted to give it a shot.

(To Adipati) How do you play as Yudhis in Edwin’s *Posesif*? Because to me, your character as Yudhis is rather explosive, but for me, as an audience member, I can feel a mixture of jealousy and possessiveness, and I feel that those indeed reside in your dark side. As a viewer, I was triggered by your performance. I’m curious, how did you delve into your character to perform your role? What was in your imagination to evoke that emotion?

**Adipati Dolken**

Honestly, when I’m acting, I don’t have anything in my imagination.

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

So you never took any feeling from your personal experience and transferred that into your character or a scene?

**Adipati Dolken**

To be honest, I never wanted to try that method. Because for me, that method is cheating. I used that before when I was asked to imagine a moment when my father died, even though my father was still alive. But I feel like I betrayed myself. I was asking myself, “Why am I cheating?” “Can I just... act?” Those questions popped into my mind when I used that method. I don’t want to mix my personal life with the story in the script. Thus in *Posesif*, I didn’t have anything in my mind. What happened in that scene triggered my reaction. I’m listening to my fellow cast members and reacting. Because when I think too much, those emotions will not come out.

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

So when you’re in a film, there is no personal experience of Adipati mixed in? You just become Yudhis and react?

**Adipati Dolken**

Yes, because I think that’s the best way, and I feel if I use my personal experience, it’s cheating. Because what I will feel will be different from the character I play. But sometimes, I use this method of recalling my personal experience when I am stuck because of external disturbances such as loud shooting sets, or fellow actors who keep messing with their dialogue, which can make me exhausted and decide to use that cheating method. Because for me, I can’t do a scene or act alone. If I think that I can act all on my own, everything will be a mess.

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

This is interesting for me because when I directed *The Photocopier*, there were some actors who could use that method, and some who couldn’t. For example Shenina Cinnamon, who played Sur, can use her emotion and past personal experience. I tried this with Lutesha, who played Farah, but she cannot do it. I want to ask you another question: how can you make sure the emotion you create as a character on the set won’t follow you to the real world?

**Adipati Dolken**

For me, to make myself angry is easy. To control it, it’s another level for me. For me, a good actor can control everything. The actor who is aware of the location of the lighting, camera, the fellow actors to control your reaction, and be aware of their own emotion. Because when you can manage your emotion, the director can do their work easily, and I can preserve my energy for my acting. I know my emotions’ peak and range, and usually I will start low. So I can have space to explore and let the director have their space to decide what they want.

**Astrid Saerong**

*Does external appreciation become an energy that keeps you in this industry?*

**Adipati Dolken**

It is a humane thing. To receive praise or awards at a film festival shows that our quality is being seen and the effort we gave appreciated. It definitely becomes an energy for me.

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

For me, appreciation is like drugs. Because if something I did can be well appreciated, I feel like the path I’ve chosen is correct. That is what makes me stay, no matter how bad the production experience was. When the film is on the screen, and people appreciate it... that’s what makes me keep going on.

**Astrid Saerong**

*We can consider that there are four generations in the Indonesian film industry: from Garin Nugroho to Mira Lesmana, Riri Riza, Nia Dinata, Shanty Harmain, and then the younger Anggi Noen, Edwin, Mouly Surya, Joko Anwar, Kamila Andini, and finally the much younger, Wregas Bhanuteja, Aditya Ahmad, Jason Iskandar, Monica Tedja, Yandi Laurens. Do you ever feel jealous or think of them as rivals in the industry?*

**Wregas  
Bhanuteja**

When I first watched Jason Iskandar’s films in high school, and when he won an award at Festival Film Solo while I didn’t even make it into the selection, there was indeed some jealousy. Now I don’t think much about it. Back then I felt I was really extroverted and always tried to mingle with people of the industry. When I worked for Mira Lesmana and Riri Riza, I came along with Riri and became a notetaker in IFD meetings because I felt that I could survive in the industry when I mingle. But since *The Photocopier*, there has been a significant change, and I think that not all people in the industry are nice. Everyone has their own agenda. I realized that this film industry is purely business, and every form of business will cause rivalry. I feel I should realize that by now.

I don’t want to join organizations within the industry such as the IFDC, FFI Committee, or BPI because I don’t want to be dragged around when they are making a decision or political stance where I have to commit with my signature. The only dream I have is to make Indonesian cinema on a par with at least Thai films or Filipino films for the world to see. I want people to know that we have something like Bong Joon Ho, whose film everyone sees, or the Thai series, *A Girl from Knowhere*, also seen by everyone. I want Indonesian films to be visible to the international audience. I can’t achieve that if I’m busy

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** with the organization and the mingling scene in Indonesia because they are talking about nothing but gossip. I will do less mingling from now on.

**Astrid Saerong** *Adipati, you've been in the industry for quite a long time and have been the main cast for major studios in Indonesia. What makes you want to work with a smaller production house such as Palari Films, which is about to make its first low-budget film. Is it Edwin (the director) that made you want to work with them? And how do you balance your commercial films with films that bring you closer to the international circuit?*

**Adipati Dolken** Honestly, I didn't even know who Edwin was. And I almost quit the project because the initial director, Teddy Soerieaatmaja, left the project. Palari Film gave me Edwin's DVDs to learn who Edwin was. After watching his films, I grew fond of his works, so I decided not to quit.

I want to go international and to Hollywood. But that will be impossible if I am a nobody in my own country. I need to build my credibility by playing both commercial and independent films. I don't want to waste my time because I'm getting older, but perhaps it's also a good sign because I'm more mature. Because we must be realistic. The work that pays my bills are the films I do with major studios. But I still can pick a film that I want to play. And working with Edwin is one way I can stay on the right track in my career.

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** I really agree with Adipati because we can only achieve freedom in making art when we have economic freedom. I don't want to make films that are too arthouse all this time, but perhaps that's because I'm not really into arthouse films. But I still have to think of a way to survive, right? Anggi Noen survives by working as a lecturer, Mouly Surya, with her palm oil business. We must balance things out. That's why I agree with Adipati's vision of going international. The world knows Malaysia because of Upin Ipin, while we have none. That's what upsets me, actually. People might still think we live in the woods. I want to prove that we exist.

**Astrid Saerong** *What do you want to change in the industry?*

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** I want the industry to have courage and to recognize that the audience can be educated. Most producers are still holding on to the horror, drama, and comedy genres with their particular formulas, which they think will bring the audience to the cinema. If only the producers dared to tweak those genres, like *Midsommar* tweaked the horror genre, the audience would follow. But the courage isn't there yet. If we have enough courage, maybe Indonesian cinema can be accepted internationally, or in Asia at least. Their mindset is segmented and they only care about what the Indonesian audience wants.

**Adipati Dolken** Standards. I think our film industry doesn't have standards. In terms of quality, the system, and production budgets. If standards were there, we could put the films into categories. For example, there are dedicated cinemas for both commercial film and arthouse film because they have different markets and don't need to be put head to head – so each has its own journey. And if we had standards, the 'gangs trend' in the industry would be finished. Because what caused chaos is that every gang has its own agenda to advance. If we have one vision, standard, and the same goal, we can work together. Because later on, the people of the industry can choose their own space and journey.

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** I agree because now it is as if we are fighting for one cake. The audience, the time slots in the cinemas, and investors. We need to work together so that the audience can have faith in our films.

**Astrid Saerong** *What do you think about the position of producers in the industry?  
Particularly producers who work with young directors on their first feature film.*

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** The Indonesian producer's style when producing a film is that they want to take charge of the creative side and the director. While in Europe, what I learned is that they trust the director's vision; thus, they will become more like a facilitator so that the vision is realized. Then they find strategies that match the film to promote and distribute it. Producers in Indonesia mostly want to become directors as well. For me, if a ship has two captains, the journey will be mediocre.

**Adipati Dolken** As an actor, being in that two-captained ship confuses me, as Wregas explained. I will still believe in my director more. But if I have no other choice, I can sit with my director and my producer because I think the process before the shooting is long...I want them to come to terms before we continue the project. I knew that this was not an action that an actor should usually take, but when the conditions were getting confusing, it forced me to intervene. Because this confusion will affect my performance if I don't get clear direction. If the director and the producer don't see eye to eye, I can't go all out. That's why I had to intervene. Finally, I had to straighten things out with the producer because I knew what my director wanted, but we also understood that the producer was the one with the money. So I had to straighten things out with the producers.

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** If, from the beginning, the producer tells the director, "I need your services because of your storytelling skills, but the story and vision is all mine. I just need you to put it on the screen," for me, that's better than when the producer says they believe in the young director's vision, but as time goes by, eventually, the director's vision is rejected. I asked, so what made you believe in my vision in the first place? Why are you asking and giving too many comments now? Most of our producers seem open to diplomacy, but in the end, they involved themselves way too much.

**Astrid Saerong** *Which part of the industry is the weakest link (i.e. producing, directing, scriptwriting, or acting)?*

**Wregas**  
**Bhanuteja** For me, it's the script. In our industry, it's rare to see one invest much time in scriptwriting. Because usually the scriptwriter is only given 3 months to write, and doesn't have enough time to make the story right. So many scripts being produced are not well developed, but they are already in line for release.

**Adipati Dolken** The script. Everyone is playing it safe now. Many have always been that way. One production house has many similar scripts, and they turn soap operas and FTV scripts into film scripts. Falcon Pictures made a lot of remakes of foreign films or series. I once asked the head of the studio, "Why remakes? Don't we have any good scripts?" The answer was, "It's hard to find strong scripts. If I do remakes, we already have a strong and foolproof script so we can put our focus on the production." But I asked again, "For remakes, as an actor, I can't really shine much because I'm only following suit."

**Adipati Dolken**

What more can I explore?" That's why I can shine better when the film is not a remake.

- May 11, 2022

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

**by** **Astrid Saerong (astridsaerong@gmail.com)** obtained degrees in Cinematography and International Business. She has worked with several renowned filmmakers in the Indonesian film industry such as Lucky Kuswandi, Kamila Andini, Riri Riza, Edwin, and Wregas Bhanuteja as an assistant director, post-production manager, distribution manager, and promotion coordinator. Astrid has also produced numerous short films including *The Flower and the Bee* and *Sleep Tight Maria* (co-produced) by Monica Vanesa Tedja, winner of Festival Sinema Prancis 2015. In 2020, she produced another Monica Vanessa Tedja short film *Dear to Me* (winner of First Cut Film Award for Best Short Animation Film, Germany, and a Special Mention Award by the Youth Jury Cinema&Gioventù in Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland).



# SHANTY HARMAYN

## Chief Executive of BASE Entertainment Indonesia

Interview by Yuh Rohana Meliala

Shanty Harmayn is an Indonesian film producer based in Jakarta. She has been in the film industry for more than 25 years. She is currently the Chief Executive of BASE ENTERTAINMENT, a Jakarta and Singapore based film studio with focus on development, financing, production, and distribution.

BASE's most recent films are Joko Anwar's *Impetigore* (2019) which premiered at Sundance 2020 and was one of Indonesia's Top 10 highest grossing films in 2019, *Trese*, a Netflix Original Animated Series based on a popular Filipino graphic novel series by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldissimo and *The East* (2021) an Amazon Prime original, a war drama by Dutch award-winning director, Jim Taihuttu, a co-production with New Amsterdam Film Company.

She's currently co-show running Prime Video's *Comedy Island* Indonesia and Philippines, and Netflix's first Indonesian Original Series, *Gadis Kretek* (Cigarette Girl) with Tanya Yuson.

Prior to BASE, Shanty Harmayn has produced award winning Indonesian films such as: *Sang Penari* (THE DANCER) in 2011 by Ifa Isfansyah - Best Indonesian Film 2011 and Indonesia's Foreign Language entry to Academy Awards 2012; *The Photograph* a film by one of Indonesia's leading female directors, Nan Achnas - Special Jury Prize at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 2008.

Educated at Stanford University, she also co-founded Jakarta International Film Festival - JiFFest (1999) and InDOCS ([www.indocs.org](http://www.indocs.org)) (2002). Now sits on the board of InDOCS and APROFI Association of Indonesian Film Producer (<https://aprofi.co.id>).

Yuh Rohana  
Meliala  
**Shanty Harmayn**

*When did you first decide to become a producer?*

Actually, it's a bit early. I had doubt at first because I was trained as a documentary filmmaker. During training, I had to learn to be a documentary filmmaker that can do it all. I learned to be a writer, director, producer, editor, sound mixer as well as the camera person. So, in a one-person crew, you must do it all. When I returned home to Indonesia, my first thought was to try to be a director, but at that time the Indonesian film industry did not exist. Imagine in the year 1994, there was no Indonesian film were being made. "What are you going to do?" my mother asked. That was the situation that I must face.

I had to start earning, so I decided to work for an advertising multinational company in strategic planning department that deals with business development. Prior to film school, I also worked as a banker. I used to work at Citibank.

So, since I have both banking and business strategy background, I ended up being the producer from the time I started to make *Kuldesak* with my peers, Mira Lesmana, Riri Riza, Nan Achnas and Rizal Mantovani and later on.

From a producer's point of view, I understand what the creative side is, I also understand production, but I also understand how to intersect with industry and business strategy. At least I so have experience discussing these terms with business parties, and I understand their way of thinking.

At the beginning, frankly, there was always a hesitation on my part because I really like to just focus on the creative process, and even up until now it's a big struggle. I need to be creative, take part in reading, the writing and watch the editing. And on the other hand, I need to look at the profits and losses, think about the business structure. So, one's brain is indeed thrown to the left and right.

So, in essence the trigger of becoming a producer is because I have the tools and the background.

Yuh Rohana  
Meliala

*As an experienced producer, you were involved in the omnibus film Kuldesak in 1998. Now you use BASE Entertainment as the main vehicle, being very active in working with many new directors. How do you bridge the company's vision with these young talents? Is regeneration an important discourse for you personally or your company?*

**Shanty Harmayn**

BASE has its own position as a studio. We want to produce works that are accessible and try to push boundaries. If you want to build a studio, your thoughts must be with industry and business. I'm not an independent producer anymore, now I have a mandate to transform this company. I strongly believe that the film industry will not progress if we do not nurture new talents.

New talent is very important. Working with new talent is something that came with from my days as an independent producer. I always produced time film directors. My first film was the first film of Nan Achnas, I also produced Ifa Isfansyah's first film. There are many first-time feature films that I have worked with. First films come with all the risks. But with the risks comes with the learnings every time, even for me, who have been in the film

**Shanty Harmayn** industry for more than 20 years.

**Yuh Rohana**  
**Meliala** *Earlier, you were talking about the risks of working with a new filmmaker. What's the biggest risk?*

**Shanty Harmayn** The issue is when we use the investors' funds and surely the investors will ask who is this director? And when it's a first time and doesn't have any track record, or the track record is sparse, it's difficult to sell the projects to the investors. This is a risk for the investor.

On one side it is an opportunity for a new filmmaker, on the other side it is risk for the investor. It is an important risk, because we need to build capacity, building new talent now.

**Yuh Rohana**  
**Meliala** *What are the opportunities for new filmmakers to make their first feature-length film currently?*

**Shanty Harmayn** In my opinion, it's much more possible now than in the past, in terms of funding and support. Maybe in my time it took a very long time to make one's first film. I remember very well my first film with Nan Achnas, *Whispering Sand*. It took at least two to three years to finally raised the money. Nan Achnas' next film, *The Photograph*, took six years. The second jump was even more difficult at that time.

**Yuh Rohana**  
**Meliala** *At that time, the fundraising process took the longest, is that right, madam?*

**Shanty Harmayn** Correct. Now there are many options. With more options, of course, comes more competition. When it comes to opportunities, there is more money, but now distribution is also a challenge. If there is a checklist, there are many conditions that must be met, even if there are funding available.

In the past, local funding didn't exist, we had to rely on overseas funding. Now, what really matters are the skill, the vision and the seriousness of the director to really focus on his/her work and articulate his/her vision well. It's a real competition now. Because it's not about money anymore, it's not about distribution anymore, it's really your vision and your capability.

**Yuh Rohana**  
**Meliala** *Usually, project markets play an important role in generating new filmmakers who will make their first feature film. Indonesia has Akatara and Jogja NETPAC Asian Film Festival's Jogja Future Project. Even then, the impact is not too significant, because even if many film projects participate, only 1 or 2 films can be made in the end, and that's only after 3-4 years of seeking funding, or even more. What do you think is missing, and what should be improved?*

**Shanty Harmayn** First thing I would like to say is that it is an extraordinary effort for those who organize the project market. It must really be appreciated. To make an event like that is incredibly arduous.

Let's talk about the projects first. In my opinion, Akatara must define what it wants to

**Shanty Harmayn** offer, and at what level. Beginner, intermediate, or advanced? Then the project can be of various kinds – animated, a short film or a feature. The question is, how will they manage the programming. I think the programming must be strong first. What do we want the output to be from the project market? When investors come to the market, these investors should know what they are going to get. Because it takes time and money. With BASE, I sent a team and told them to check out which of the 20 projects are viable.

I think Akatara is still having some trouble getting enough projects. Maybe it's in terms of quantity, or maybe it's an issue of quality. They need to work to make it an exciting market. Building the selection in terms of genre and curating filmmakers so that investors will be very interested in coming to the project market. Akatara needs to build investor expectations so that they come thinking that they can get a project. They also must also manage expectations from filmmakers who think, "Yes, I can get some funding here."

Just yesterday I heard from one of the participants who said, "Oh, there are not many investors, I only got 12 meetings, out of which only 4 were real investors and that include BASE. The rests are NGOs that have curation of projects based on their interest.

Investors will come to project market if they see variety. Five years ago, the box office film *Keluarga Cemara* was picked up at Akatara. Project market needs this kind of story, so after the market finishes, it has a track record. Industry will say, "Oh, that's where they picked up *Keluarga Cemara*, and the film became a box office hit." That's good programming, which is extremely difficult. It can't just be any project. Look at APM at Busan, L'Atelier at Cannes or La Fabrique. They have track record. That's why everyone wants to apply because they know they will most likely get funding.

**Yuh Rohana**  
**Meliala** *How is the industry doing in terms of turning out new filmmakers, especially in terms of the quality and quantity of film producers?*

**Shanty Harmayn** Honestly, it's too little in my opinion. Many producers coming from a different entry point into the industry. I'm currently really worried about producing in Indonesia. I always have this conversation with Mira Lesmana. "Who else is there?" How many producers can write and edit scripts? We need to be able to write, edit scripts. On *The Dancer*, I was a script editor. What if you must do a breakdown? Both Mira and I used to be a line producer. We started from the bottom. We learned how things work. We understand the production language.

Then there is the other language which is development. When we sit with the writer, we must know that language, too. For this we need to watch many films. We also must understand how to talk to investors, how to make a projection of revenues, to know how distribution works, franchises, talking about deal structures, financial instruments, getting financing. That's another language we must know.

Finally, there is the legal aspect. Sitting with a lawyer, understanding clearance, understanding IP, structuring of an IP deal. We also have to talk to the OTT/streamers, this negotiation, this contract. You need to have all those languages and that's what it is like to be a producer.

**Shanty Harmayn** I hate it when the word producer is reduced and simplified as a person who gives money, or the person who manages the production. Because it's not like that. It's like juggling five balls in the air, and you must skillfully do that and still become a partner to the director and understand the director and the writer. Then after everyone has left the project, we are still managing the rights, and the last person getting paid. That's why the word 'producer' is sacred to me.

Going back to your question, I think we are in a crisis when it comes to generating new producers. Yes, a crisis. There are producers who want to move from line producing but are not yet comfortable to go to the next level. They asked me to teach, but how? Experience is the best and only teacher.

For example, I didn't understand the legal side at first. But I got acquainted with an entertainment lawyer who eventually became my very good friend. From 2011 to 2014, in those 3 years I worked closely with him on structuring all my projects. I learned a lot from him. This is how I learned producing.

**Yuh Rohana** *In BASE, are there several producers or are you the only producer?*

**Meliala**  
**Shanty Harmayn** Working for me there are several producers.

**Yuh Rohana** *What are the challenges of being a film producer in Indonesia?*

**Meliala**  
**Shanty Harmayn** Currently, there are many challenges in our market.

We are now a market of interest for many OTT/streamers. They see Indonesia as a major market with growth and there are lots of investment into our market now. But the lack supply of human resources on all fronts is the biggest challenge. Producers is one, super crisis level. How can we to step up to the golden opportunity that is given in our market today?

We don't have enough supply of talents. If we want to maintain quality, how will we do it? I wish we were like Korea with a vision. I wish we already have at least twice number of human resources we have now. Yuh. I'm worried that this golden opportunity won't last for a long time. My biggest concern is that we might end up reducing quality because of the lack of people. Because when we're not on top of the game, it becomes just quantity, and the collective quality drops. Then, the interest of the international platforms won't last long. That's the biggest challenge in my opinion.

**Yuh Rohana** *Ma'am, I'm curious, how do you find investment for your films?*

**Meliala**  
**Shanty Harmayn** As a company, we have institutional funding.

**Yuh Rohana** *I'm curious because you also live in Singapore, is there any funding from Singapore too?*

**Shanty Harmayn** In relation to our Singapore company, BASE is also working on Philippines as a territory. We have several projects that are not Indonesian projects. These projects as well as our English language projects we base it out of our Singapore company. We do not want to

**Shanty Harmayn** base in our Indonesian company as it would be too complex, in terms of IP management.

**Yuh Rohana** *You mean, financially things are better in Singapore?*

**Meliala**  
**Shanty Harmayn** Yes, financially everything is much more flexible.

**Yuh Rohana** *In AFiS, we are taught to be entrepreneurs. It's true that many films in the film world don't earn back their investment, so filmmaking is a risk. But the packaging of a film is quite important, it must really make the audience want to watch.*

**Shanty Harmayn** Packaging is a skill. Yuh, I have a business partner whose skill at packaging films is much better than mine. So, I always ask what he thinks. "What do you think?" It's a way of testing as well. It's good to have different opinions, check and balance.

**Yuh Rohana** *For the project The East, why did you decide to make it as an international co-production? In terms of numbers, it is quite expensive, so how do you handle the risk in such a project?*

**Shanty Harmayn** Actually, I am not the lead producer, the lead producer is our Dutch counterpart. When I was offered for the first time, I looked first at the creative elements. And when I read the creative treatment, I thought, wow this is interesting. I am also a fan of historical stories. Moreover, history blended with genre is my favorite. The director is impressive, especially when I met him in person. He's also a famous DJ. It's a smart and very interesting project. Majority of the film shot in Indonesia.

As a producer, I have a kind of a checklist. Have I done a musical? Not yet. Have I done an action film? There are certain achievements that I would like to check in my career. One of them is I wanted to do a war film properly. The scope of *The East* interests me. The funding on my side was not so much, and I was able to raise funds successfully.

In a co-production, business structure must be negotiated. That's another skill that I want to achieve. It's a bit like a stress test. For me, a project like *The East* is an important milestone as a producer. It's the biggest film budget I've ever handled, dealing with multiple countries. It was challenging content, so there were a lot of boxes that this project ticked. From there I had to cast a team, and our team was able to learn a lot. That's another one of the reasons why I said yes to *The East*. The learning curve was very high.

**Yuh Rohana** *Do you think Indonesia is ready to conduct international co-productions with other countries? What are the challenges?*

**Shanty Harmayn** Not all producers are ready, it's a very small number. And then the financial responsibilities are enormous. For *The East*, in a week my accounting team had to settle an expense of 7-8M IDR. It had to balance every Monday morning. It's separate skill to manage that much money, with such a large cash flow, and make sure it all balances.

**Yuh Rohana** *I read that you were one of the founders of Jakarta International Film Festival and In-Docs. What were some of your challenges in building Jakarta International Film Festival?*

**Shanty Harmayn**

The biggest challenge at that time was to secure stable funding. Jakarta International Film Festival is one of the brightest things in my resume. I started with Jakarta International Film Festival. I grew together with the festival; I had major learnings. I got to know many filmmakers through the Film Festival. I also watched the most movies in the period that I was managing Jakarta International Film Festival. It was an extraordinary struggle because we never knew whether we would have the festival or not. It was like that every year. It was hard at the time.

I envy Busan International Film Festival. I've come to understand about its business structure, how the funding works, how it's being managed, who approves it. From there I already knew that this could never be achieved for Jakarta International Film Festival. Festivals in Korea, France or the Netherlands, the political commitment is strong. As for us, we don't know whether we will have the funding, we couldn't do proper research for the next year's festival. In Busan or in Cannes, they decide on a theme early, such as a country of focus, they have money to send a research team. The research method is clear, as well as the business development of the festival itself. That's what Jakarta International Film Festival didn't have. In essence, Jakarta International Film Festival is a success in improvisation (laughs). But our team shows extraordinary dedication and resilience. Especially when we didn't know what the budget will be, and funding isn't guaranteed. That's what was incredibly difficult.

The difference with In-Docs is that it doesn't have the same time pressure as Jakarta International Film Festival, which must carry out festival activities every year. In-Docs was on a smaller scope, while Jakarta International Film Festival is an annual service for the broader public and film lovers. One of key of In-Docs' sustainability was the leadership succession. After my directorship, there was the late Chandra, followed by Amelia who is the greatest blessing from God. Many ideas as founder that I might have for In-Docs in my head, but didn't have the time and energy to do, Amelia was able to bring to reality, expand it further and bring it to an exceptionally higher level.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*How did you know Amelia Hapsari?*

I got to know Amel when she and I lived in Beijing. After that, we kept in touch, planning to make a documentary together. At first, we wanted to make a documentary about Chinese Indonesian who emigrated and live in China they are called Huaqiao. But during shooting in Jakarta, they didn't want to talk, to stand out. So, our documentary project seemed to have failed, but through that documentary project, Amelia met Ahok. Eventually, Amel, Ciang and I ended up producing a documentary about him [*Fight Like Ahok*]. Later Ahok became famous, but it wasn't something we planned (laughs).

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*I watched your interview with Netflix, I remember you saying that in the future, you want to start a film school. Are film schools in Indonesia still lacking?*

I think they are still lacking. I was impressed with KAFA (Korean Academy of Film Arts). I was invited by KOFIC and CJ ENM together with many filmmakers including Mouly Surya and Joko Anwar to stay in Seoul for two weeks. We were introduced to the Korean industry, meet top directors as well as producers. Then we were brought to the school. The building itself was quite modest. But the school has an amazing list of alumni,

**Shanty Harmayn**

including Bong Joon Ho. I was so impressed. They explained that KAFA alumni contributed a big percentage of the Korean Cinema box office. How can a school produce graduates who are so extraordinary, that means its training has real vision.

When I was at Stanford the size of my class were small. Only ten people in my class, but now my classmates are top documentary filmmakers in the US. Three classmates made the sequel to *An Inconvenient Truth*, yesterday one classmate receive an Oscar nomination for *Lead Me Home*, another was an Oscar nominee for last year's for *Crip Camp*. I really believe in small classes, Yuh. You may have only 10 students, but you create leaders.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

*How is this related to job opportunities in the Indonesian film industry?*

**Shanty Harmayn**

Currently, the film industry needs a lot of people. I think the hiring rate is extraordinarily high. I haven't seen precise data, I'm just guessing. It's not easy for producers like me right now to find crew who are available. Our junior producers in BASE is working hard in searching.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

*Currently there are two cities in Indonesia that are the center of film industry activity: Jakarta and Yogyakarta. This means that opportunities are unequal for other cities. What do you think should be added or improved?*

**Shanty Harmayn**

We need to build more centers, not only in Jogja, but in other places too. Let's analyze why it happened in Jogja. First, Yogyakarta has the landscape, secondly, it is a cultural city, so there is that element. Then, there are many universities and educational institutions. There are several elements that the government need to see as pillars that can help make another city a film center.

So now where is next? Animation for instance, there are several possible centers. These centers often developed because there was a school, in Surabaya and Malang for example. I also see East Java as a potential, but I don't think it's maximized it yet. In terms of shooting locations, East Java has Bromo, Ijen, then there is Banyuwangi, so you can add investment to focus on it.

Sumatra also needs a center. We just need to see whether it is Medan, or is it Palembang or Padang? It could be Medan because it has the easiest access, it's a big city and the economy. In comparison, Makassar has a lot of a film enthusiasts, because filmmakers from Makassar like Riri helps making it stronger. Medan has Joko Anwar!

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*Riri Riza is really active in the Makassar screen community.*

That's why we need that effect. There really needs to be a group of people who will push for it. In Jogja, right from the first time there were Garin Nugroho, Hanung Bramantyo, so there is a strong Jogja base. Later I'll tell Joko Anwar, haha, come on Joko, show your teeth, build Medan.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*In your opinion, how important a role do film archives play in Indonesia today?*

It's very important, because we must learn from history. The work of our predecessors is very, very important for us to know. We need to deeply understand the development of our film language and storytelling, right? If our archiving is weak, how are we going to watch these films?

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*There is the Asian Film Archive in Singapore.*

Yes, it requires a large amount of funding. That's another example of political commitment. The variable which is the least constant in Indonesia is the government. If it were more constant, it would be like Korea or Singapore.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*Does the Indonesian film industry currently have an active labor union?*

What we have is associations, I don't think it can be considered a labor union. We are all aware that the industry has many issues that we must address and deal with such as terms of employment issues and industrial practices. For example: there are many productions that don't have production insurance and safety.

There is a concerted effort and focus on this. One very good thing about the entrance of Netflix, Disney and other international streamers to Indonesia is compliance to their 12-working hour rule, anti-corruption training and anti-sexual harassment training.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*What is the state of Indonesian film criticism today?*

I think this is a crisis too. When I started my career in film in the 1990s, at that time there were few film critics who were true cinephiles and can write well. Between them there was also a sense of competition. They have real passion for film critic. Somehow the regeneration of critics has stalled. There were reviews Kompas, Tempo, and other magazines. We filmmakers used to be anxious as well as excited to see what they would write. It was a matter of pride when a film was reviewed, that meant it was recognized. Whether it's praised or not, when he or she took the time to review it, that meant it was considered important. And the reviews became a topic of discussion.

In the last ten years, maybe, I feel that there are fewer serious critics. I think the last generation was Hikmat Darmawan, Eric Sasono, Adrian Jonathan... There are fewer people, in my opinion, who have the skills to write with film studies background. And now we are into social media. There is a real shift. Firstly, there is an emphasis of what is cool, what is viral and most talked about. Second, there are reviewers on social media, but the emphasis is on what they like and dislikes. In my opinion, the soul of film criticism is a bit lost now.

The best part of film criticism is when you can review and critique a film, but in a spirit of supporting the creator. After publishing the review, you can still have coffee with the creator, and have a discussion on why did you say that? That's the spirit that I think might be lost.

**Yuh Rohana**

**Meliala**

**Shanty Harmayn**

*What are your plans for the future?*

I want to be productive. I'm 55 now, so I don't see the word retirement yet. I can't imagine myself being inactive. Maybe I'll keep producing as long as I can. There are several projects or types of projects that I really want to do, whether on a certain scale or from certain stories, so that's my short-term goal.

I would love to continue working with young colleagues who are in their twenties and thirties. I also would like to build a film school later. But I feel what I am every day right now is like teaching in a film school.

*- April 15, 2022*

**by** **Yuh Rohana Meliala (yuhrohana@gmail.com)** was born in Medan, Indonesia in 1994, and completed her bachelor's degree in Accounting from Universitas Indonesia. She learned cinema since joining Sinematografi UI, a film community at the university. In 2017, she founded Megalesha Films and began producing short films. *The Scent of Rat Carcasses* premiered at the 2021 Singapore International Film Festival and she studied film producing in the 2022 International Film Business Academy, Busan Asian Film School (AFiS).



# GARIN NUGROHO

Film Director / Writer / Producer

Indonesia

Interview by Beta Giovanni Rahmadeva

Garin Nugroho is one of the most important Southeast Asian filmmakers of his era, who has captured his nation's complexity through the language of film while working in various disciplines. Garin was a pioneer of the post-1990 film generations, able to revive enthusiasm for film when the monetary crisis hit Indonesia in 1998. He has received many awards at film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Tokyo and Busan, and won various other honors from national and international film festivals.

In the midst of the Indonesian film industry's slump from 1990 to 1998, Garin's films overcame the crisis of that era through his films *Love on a Slice of Bread* (Cinta Dalam Sepotong Roti, 1991), *Letters to an Angel* (Surat untuk Bidadari, 1994), *And The Moon Dances* (Bulan Tertusuk Ilalang, 1995) and *Leaf on a Pillow* (Daun di Atas Bantal, 1998).

Apart from his contributions to cinema, Garin has also published a series of non-fiction books and contributed regular columns for the largest newspaper company in Indonesia, KOMPAS, as well as being active in performing arts, dance, and art installations. His art installations have been shown in prestigious galleries such as Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, and the Louis Vuitton Gallery, Paris. His latest works include the silent film *Satan Jawa* (Setan Jawa, 2017), with music played by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the Netherland Chamber Orchestra and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Garin keeps fostering new generations through film and art workshops in many regions in Indonesia, as well as through various festivals which he has founded, for example, the LA Indie Movie Festival and Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF). JAFF has inspired new film generations in Jogjakarta and established Jogjakarta as a film city.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*I want to ask you about your mentor, whom I've researched before, Teguh Karya. What did you learn from Teguh Karya?*

Garin Nugroho

I used to be a journalist, and I wrote film criticism. But I never studied these subjects or even took an internship. I did interviews for the newspaper Kompas. After doing four pieces of writing for them, sometimes my reward would be to be sent to a film festival. I was in Berlin in 1988, but I hadn't finished those mandatory four articles, I had only done two. So I had to find another topic to write about, such as a director's profile. That was when I met Teguh. The highlight of Teguh's works is his personal and artistic style. The colour palette of his films is taken from the color of his house. It has much vegetation with a Dutch-Portuguese-Indonesian style. The red in his films are the bricks' red, the old greenish hue that never went out of control, the red earth. There's no way he would use bright colours. All of that reflects his personality. That was the most important aspect of Teguh's works.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*So you never learned any technical skills from him?*

Garin Nugroho

No, I didn't. I mainly learned those from Nya Abbas Akub. From Teguh, I learned about his background as a journalist and critic.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*Was he the only prominent figure at that time?*

Garin Nugroho

We have many figures from the late 70s or the 80s; besides Teguh, each director usually had a theatre group with their own unique characteristics. There was Arifin, Teguh Karya, Wim Umboh, Nja Abbas Akub.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*I thought you formally studied under Teguh or worked as an intern with him.*

Garin Nugroho

No. I have never been his assistant director before. And there was no formal education from Teguh Karya.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*So, where did your inspiration come from?*

Garin Nugroho

Every director in Indonesia has their own unique inspiration. Teguh Karya had his personal artistic approach, Sjumandjaya had a socialistic approach since he graduated from Russia, Abbas Akub had his social comedy, and Sjumandjaya, the love story of the era; each has distinctive characteristics worth learning. The same goes for international directors—Kieślowski with his humanistic approach, for example. The Three Colors Trilogy *Red/White/Blue* is all about humanity. The director of *Dead Poets Society*, from Australia, talks more about politics. Each has its own forms that we can study.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*Was it hard to be on the international stage at that time? You were in Un Certain Regard; how was your journey to get there?*

Garin Nugroho

It was pretty different back then. The Soeharto era was a hard one. Now, elite filmmakers think the year 1998 marked the overturning of Indonesian cinema's crisis with the film *Kuldesak*. But we need to take a note here. The younger generation forgot that Christine Hakim's *Leaf on a Pillow* was a film made in the era people understand as the crisis of

**Garin Nugroho**

Indonesian cinema. Everyone knows that film, unlike the film *Kuldesak* which is only known to certain elite film people. During the crisis, I was almost desperate to try to make a film, but I could only make documentaries or write some film criticism. Because at that time, before directing a film, we had to work as script assistants and assistant directors five times and get signatures from three directors. If the director wants to sign that's fine, but what if they don't? With that, you have to work on at least 15 films before you can direct your own film, to become a director recognized by the Union of Film Workers. That was how the system worked in Indonesia – all centralised by-laws under Soeharto, under the Ministry of Information. Under the ministry, we had the National Film Committee, and then we had the film worker associations. This system followed the European style, yet it applied a militaristic approach. Everything was controlled, from the title to who's working behind the camera, and the screenplay; all controlled from the beginning.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*So the people in high places controlled everything?*

Well, the institutions were fine, but the control they asserted was not democratic. The system was indeed copied from Western institutions; there were film workers, film committees, and overseeing committees. I was born in that Soeharto era, where it's impossible to create art if you don't follow that hierarchical route. The only way to create my own art is to fight against the system. But you know, that's true not only in Soeharto's era. Even now, if something obstructs you or your freedom to create art, you will get angry, right? The simplest way to say it is when I talked to Mr Teguh: if you don't allow me to make my art, I will be the Film Workers Union's nemesis for eternity. I finally managed to get those signatures. But not for all of us. That's when the Film Workers Union had to make a trial out of it.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Was the signature everything you needed to become a director?*

Yes, indeed. But all of the crew also needed the signature, and it was impossible if we were still following that system. That's why we had to fight it. It's that simple, but because we were fighting that during Suharto's era – it made everything hard. That's why the KFT [Asosiasi Karyawan Film dan Televisi/ Union Film Workers] could make those trials. Many journalists questioned us, pressured us, and a lot of intelligence work was done to try to get information from us. But that was just another day for us. There's no way the current generation will experience so much pressure now because we're in the Reformation era. But that was it. It was hard, making me desperate. Until a person from Goethe Institut approached me and gave me encouragement. They sent me to Berlin to watch a famous film, but I forgot the title. It was from the category Das Internationale Forum des Jungen Films, if I'm not mistaken. I remembered *Moonstruck* won that time. After watching those films, my spirit was reignited. I wanted to be there. I wanted to go international.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Did you make short films or any other works at that time?*

Yes. I made short films and documentaries, and I wrote as well. I've been writing film criticism since 1986. Then my first film, *Love on a Slice of Bread*, was the first work that made producers like good pictures, romantic yet still with my personal touch. People loved them. My work became like a trademark, my personal work, industry works, commercials, and even music videos. Afterwards, my next film, *And The Moon Dances*

**Garin Nugroho**

went to Berlin and got an award from the Federation of Film Critics, then *Leaf on a Pillow* went to Cannes.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Where did Love on a Slice of Bread screen?*

It was at the Tokyo International Film Festival.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Did you make and design Love on a Slice of Bread to be a film with wide appeal?*

When I work on a project, there are two routes for me; to be in the middle or in the alternative space. I make a popular film that still has my personal touch, or an alternative film that is entirely me.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Was it a long journey to finally reach Un Certain Regard?*

Before I got to Berlin, people already knew about Indonesian films, not only my works. Christine Hakim was already famous and one of the big names in Indonesia. *Leaf on a Pillow* was based on an NHK documentary that I directed. Then I was also helped by Pierre Rissient, a great Cannes program advisor. So all elements of PR to support the film were there.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*Back then, everyone already knew Christine Hakim?*

Yes, of course. If you mention an Indonesian actress, you must name Christine Hakim. Moreover, her previous film *Tjoet Nja Dien* was in Critics' Week at Cannes. Her name was well known. Also, Indonesia didn't have many social themed films. When I made a documentary, *Air dan Romi* (1991), the police intelligence were all over me. People don't think I made documentaries, but actually, I made a lot of them. And for the note, back then, you could only submit your film to a festival through the embassy. And it had to be chosen by the Film Committee. If not, you cannot submit your film.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**  
**Garin Nugroho**

*How was the submission journey before the internet?*

When I sent my film to Berlin, I waited a month for their letter. I didn't have a telephone. And we had to send the actual 35 mm reels.

**Giovanni**  
**Rahmadeva**

*Why have you chosen to work with many producers over your career? Why not stay with just one producer? How do you choose someone to produce your works?*

**Garin Nugroho**

For me, it's simple. The market is diverse. So are the producers. Every idea has its own place. It'll grow in a specific environment with a particular amount of water, just like various breeds of plants. For example, when I made *Leaf on a Pillow*, which had the potential to become a popular film, I could take Christine Hakim and her friends to invest in it. But for *Opera Jawa*, there's no way I'd offer that project to Indonesian producers. I got support for *Opera Jawa* for the commemoration of Mozart's birthday, so this project has a particular market. But for *Chaotic Love Poem (Aach, Aku Jatuh Cinta)* and my current project, *Puisi Cinta yang Membunuh*, both can work within a studio setting because they starred Pevita Pearce and Mawar de Jongh. Mr. Parwez [the major studio

**Garin Nugroho**

producer & CEO of Starvision] will love it. *Satan Jawa*, the silent film accompanied by Gamelan, is funded by the Melbourne Art Center. There's no way I'd offer *Satan Jawa* to Mr. Parwez. I usually divide it into two systems; the producer/studio system and the indie system. The producer system is just like what Mira Lesmana did. All produced by her, she can choose any director. Then the indie system, just like I did. I can work with whomever I want. Each method has its consequences. Each needs management capability, fundraising, etc. No system is better than the other.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*I understand that you've written for OTT. With Netflix?*

Yes, the first original Indonesian production.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*I would say that you're rather adaptive in response to platform changes?*

Well, in every period, we would follow the new systems that were created. For example, 1991-1995 was the rise of private television broadcasts. When we're about to plough land, we have first to understand its ecosystem like a seasonal farmer. On television, in 1992, there was a program called TV Commercial cinema in RCTI [the first Indonesian private owned TV channel]. It screened my documentaries like *Anak Seluruh Pulau*. Then I also made many music videos. I made Katon's video clip, *Negeri di Atas Awan*. I also made commercials for Gudang Garam. Why did I make all those? It's for me to understand the market and its possibilities. But I still do good work on different platforms to create the best. I still won the best music video award and won best documentary award. That was 1992-1995. Now we have the OTT ecosystem. I made one for OPPO, and *Siti Nurbaya* for YouTube. Each has its market, and we have to learn to utilise all of that for our work. So, every ten years, we have to learn a new ecosystem.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*How do you choose your crew? Is it based on personal or professional connections?*

First, I'll consider the quality of the crewmembers. The second is their character. The third is if they can agree with the film's vision and challenge. For example, when I made *Letters to an Angel* in Sumba, we had no lighting because we had no money. That's why I chose a more easy-going crew that could understand the circumstances.

When I made *And The Moon Dances* I didn't use the same crew from *Leaf on a Pillow*. Because the film required detailed lighting and we needed considerable effort to make everything neat. *Letters to an Angel* was shot in a challenging environment on an island. I needed a cinematographer that in many situations, could stay calm and say, "I'll handle it, Garin", even though he might not be so sure he can handle it himself. So the particular characteristics of each person should match the film's ambition. That's how you yield professionalism. If we want to make a horror film, we need to have an ambition in the horror genre. If everyone matches that ambition and loves it, their professionalism will be fueled.

I make a film based on an idea that I love. Thus not everyone will love my idea. That's why I have to find a producer who loves my idea. I'll present my statement and my personal purpose. Here, for example, with *Puisi Cinta yang Membunuh*, the producer wants to make good sales out of it. For me, there should be two different purposes. The macro

**Garin Nugroho**

purpose is to be popular. Then so be it. But for the micro purpose, I wanted to make something that I hadn't done before. Take kung-fu films for example. From Bruce Lee, Jet Li, and John Woo, each has his own characteristics. John Woo, with his slow motion; *IP Man* which combines kung fu and drama... Each element in the genre is being developed. That will make the audience grow as well. If we want to create something, we must have a real purpose in our minds: to develop the technology, to renew a theme, to make a breakthrough in the market. If you don't have any purpose, you're better off not making anything.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*In some projects, you choose to be a producer as well.*

Actually, I produce many films by myself. *The Blindfold, A Poet*. Sometimes I don't take credit for it. Most of my films actually have me involved as a producer. But I don't think of it as my primary profession. Becoming a producer is a way to protect me and my works, not a professional goal.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*How do you work with young people on your films?*

*Do you actively guide them, let them be, or treat them how they want to be treated?*

It has been different in each case. Like in *And The Moon Dances*, most of my crew were college students. Riri Riza, John de Rantau and Toto Prasetyanto were still students at that time. The staff of JAFF also once worked for me. Riri for example, he was good with organisation. Once I told him, "Take 650,000 of money from my account, and manage it. You're the head of the production now!" Then for John, "John, you have a loud and stern voice; you be my assistant!" By teaching, we can understand people's character quickly.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*When you met Mouly and you said you had a story for her that inspired Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts – was it spontaneous?*

We have two paths in life: the one we design and the one designed by nature. We can plan our life, but the mixture of nature's mysteries and many other factors can generate unlimited possibilities. That's what happened with Mouly. When I met her, I thought that girl could be my staff member, and that day I told her that I had a good story that could change her life. I've seen her works, and I think my story was better for a woman to direct, not a man.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*During the controlling regime back then, did you often get censored?*

Yes, for my documentaries. When I made *Air dan Romi*, I often came head-to-head with the police and the military.

**Giovanni**

**Rahmadeva**

**Garin Nugroho**

*What about your Papuan project?*

The same. If you risk meeting the rebel leader, Matias Henda, you must also understand that you must face the police and military. But you also have to count on your networks. We shouldn't be too naïve about that.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva  
Garin Nugroho

*How do you deal with controversial issues like that?*

The first thing to consider is if we are working for goodwill. We don't have to put everything on the record. If we do something for humanity, we shouldn't be too rough or over our heads. Then second, we must understand many perspectives from an anthropological, sociological, and psychological point of view. We must know the Christian networks, even the religion of the head of police.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*Do you see the younger generation of filmmakers – your students – as competitors? Or do they also become a catalyst for your career development?*

Garin Nugroho

If you have become a teacher, you must be ready when your students dispute you. If no one disputes you, then they're not excellent students.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva  
Garin Nugroho

*What kind of dispute?*

Various kinds. If you want to make a new wave/history, you must dispute the old style. If you're a teacher, you must be ready that, in time, your students will run faster than you. There will always be new dynamics in life. There will always be something new with the newer generation, and we are bound to like the differences that they made. Back then, the theatre of 1970-1980 was skilled, but then the next generation had better organizational skills. Now actors can survive without playing in a film if they already have many followers. Back then, actors had to act in films if they wanted to be famous.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*In the age where everything is fast, with a kind of copy-paste technology, if you will – how can an artist find their voice?*

Garin Nugroho

I think there are some values that I consider universal; personality, character, and willingness to make discoveries. Times may change, but our concerns, urge to discover, and personal character will never disappear.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*For me, film is also a commodity, aside from being a personal art or product of culture. What is your take on your art as 'products'?*

Garin Nugroho

I knew that not every film of mine would go to a film festival. In Papua, NTT, we still have a barter system for their traditional market. Sometimes it happens in life. *The Blindfold* was produced by a NGO. What can we get out of that film? We barter that with the message of anti-radicalism when we screen it in schools. That was our barter's reward. The barter will be with the audience count if you go to commercial films. It's the same.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*What about the works that left you 'at a loss'? How do you manage your benefits when making a film?*

Garin Nugroho

Because most of my work doesn't provide a large reward in ticket sales, I already project my other reward. I think that Indonesians are greedy. *Opera Jawa* is meant to be the opening for Mozart's birthday anniversary, but people commented about it not being successful in Indonesia. I think that's Indonesia's greedy perspective, not mine. I think Indonesians are too idealistic and fail to see that. Every film has its market. I don't really

Garin Nugroho

like dealing with the box office system. It's too complicated for me. I better use my time to create new ideas rather than worry about screening schedules, promotions, etc. Dealing with the market is different from the creation process, where I have complete control.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*If we take your perspective as a family man, a father – how do you keep everything in balance while still trying to create good art?*

Garin Nugroho

I work like a farmer that doesn't only plant one kind of crop. If I made a film once every two years, there's no way I would have provided for my family. I had to write, I had to teach, I did my best. It doesn't mean that I was, in a way, 'defeated' in my career. I like teaching. I like writing. All the while I still keep my ambitions.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*Do you face any crises when confronting the new age? Either new-age filmmakers, or the new age of the audience?*

Garin Nugroho

Absolutely. But primarily, I have benefited from crises and hard times because they have pushed me to find answers to many unanswered questions. I must navigate the situation. While people were busy with technology, I made *Satan Jawa*, a classic silent film. It's all about how we can interpret the situation to make discoveries.

Giovanni  
Rahmadeva

*What about awards and appreciation? Do you remember a specific personal conversation with maybe the President or some other people?*

Garin Nugroho

I love it when someone unexpectedly knows my films and likes them. For example, when I was in Jogja, this street busker talked about *Leaf on a Pillow* in detail. It was a small thing but it was meaningful to me. It was a privileged moment for me.

- April 2, 2022

by **Giovanni Rahmadeva (rahmadeva.info@gmail.com)** is a film producer based in Jakarta, Indonesia. His latest works include two of the most prestigious films in Indonesia; *Night Bus* (Best Film of FFI 2017) and *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (Directors' Fortnight Cannes 2017 & Best film of FFI 2018). In 2018 he also worked as a co-producer for Koji Fukada's *The Man from the Sea*. After initiating Jendela Papua in 2020, the first ever Indonesian talent lab that resulted in a feature-length film, Giovanni collaborated with its graduate, Theo Rumansara, to produce his first film, ORPA. As the 1st fiction feature-length film ever directed by a native Papuan, the film screened in the Indonesian Screen Awards of Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival 2022 and won the Best Performance award. Working with first-time directors is a challenge that he loves as now Giovanni is developing Devina Sofiyanti's 1st feature, *The Heirlooms*, selected in 2022 TFL Extended. Besides films, he has contributed in several Indonesian music video productions, corporate videos, TVCs, original soundtracks, musical albums & is still active as a drummer-songwriter for his band Polka Wars.



# SHOZO ICHIYAMA

Producer / Programming Director

Tokyo International Film Festival

Japan

Interview by Yuichiro Nakada

Shozo Ichiyama worked as the producer for such films as *Nowhere Man* by Naoto Takenaka and films by Hou Hsiao-sien (*Good Men, Good Women, Goodbye South, Goodbye and Flowers Of Shanghai*). Later he joined Office Kitano and produced films by Jia Zhang-ke (*Platform, Unknown Pleasures, The World, 24 City, A Touch Of Sin, Mountains May Depart*) and Samira Makhmalbaf (*Blackboards*), among others. He has long been the Festival Director of Tokyo FILMEX, which he founded. His later works include *Mr. Long* by Sabu, *Ash Is Purest White* by Jia Zhang-ke, *They Say Nothing Stays The Same* by Joe Odagiri and *The Calming* by Song Fang. He is currently the Programming Director of Tokyo International Film Festival.

## Yuichiro Nakada

*First, I would like to ask you about how you started as a producer.*

## Shozo Ichiyama

I joined Shochiku as a producer, and at first, I was working in the direction of producing Japanese films in the normal way. At the beginning, I was an assistant under Mr. Okuyama. I was credited as a producer on *Violent Cop* though I was more like an assistant producer. After that, I started a project by director Naoto Takenaka titled *Nowhere Man*. Of course, Shochiku was investing, so we did nothing in terms of fundraising. However it was the first time for me to work as a producer on my own, including shooting, script development and casting as well as overseas film festivals such as the Venice Film Festival selection.

I was not aiming for any particular kind of film festival at that time. By chance, I heard that Marco Müller, who served as director of the Locarno Film Festival and would later become the director of Venice, had come to Japan. Then he recommended me to Venice, and it got into the Critics' Week, the category for new directors. I hadn't thought about film festivals at all before, and I hadn't even thought about how to release the films in Japan normally. The conversation started when the Venice selection committee members happened to be there. So, I submitted, and it ended up winning the Federation of Critics Award, so it was great promotion in Japan. At that time, the films that were aiming for film festivals were all recognized directors such as Nagisa Oshima, Akira Kurosawa, and Shohei Imamura, and I had a feeling those new director's film would not be accepted. In fact, the only ones that succeeded were Kaizo Hayashi's *To Sleep So as to Dream* which went into Venice's Critics Week, and Shinya Tsukamoto's *Iron Man*, which screened in the fantastic film festival circuit, so people didn't actively submit. Also, European film festivals did not have that much interest in Japanese cinema yet. After all, what was there in Japanese cinema was mostly Kurosawa, Imamura, and Oshima etc. Everyone wanted to screen films that belonged to that generation. Hiroshi Teshigawara's films were often screened in quite a few film festivals at that time. In those days, only the big names went there, and it was thought that there was no possibility that new directors could go. In fact, nowadays, there are quite a few film festivals with new director divisions, but at the time there weren't so many of them. So it was around that time that Marco Mueller, Tony Rayns, and other critics and film festival programmers introduced them to Japan and Asia, and gradually everyone started to pay attention to Asia.

So, I wasn't really aiming for it. Perhaps *Violent Cop* or something like that could have entered in some film festivals since Kitano's work was later appreciated in Europe, but I didn't submit them at all. From the beginning, I was focused on how to release it in Japan, and later Takeshi's films started to circulate. So it seemed that various elements were starting to come together. Japanese film companies will also actively enter if it is a work of such a master. Just the year before, in 1990, a film by Kohei Toguri *The Sting of Death* went to Cannes and won the Grand Prix. Those films by master directors are likely to be submitted. Mr. Takenaka was a newcomer, though he'd been active as an actor. Moreover, no one thought that a film that was shot on a low budget with a little over 100 million for Shochiku would enter the film festival. I hadn't heard of Marco Mueller coming at that time, so I hadn't even shown it. I was in a situation where I didn't even think about entering, even if it was completed. But once it happened to get selected, it became great news. Thanks to that, the box office in Japan went well too.

In 1992, a year after *Nowhere Man* was released, I was forced to go help the Tokyo

## Shozo Ichiyama

International Film Festival. They said all the other companies had already sent people except Shochiku. The film festival was held in September. Around August, when everything had already been decided, I went to help with the on-site affairs only. But in the following year, they asked me to come all year. When I reflect on it now, I can't believe it. But there was a section called Asian Outstanding Film Week, which was like a sidebar for Asian films, and there were no audiences for it. I immediately understood why. I happened to be working on great films, but there is a thing called Eirini: Administration Commission of Motion Picture Code of Ethics in Japan, and I was just showing the movies recommended by organizations of various countries. In other words, rather than having a selection, there were applications from each country, and those 10 submissions were screened. So, there was Tadao Sato, who recently passed away, and other people on the selection committee, but in the end, it was like dropping a few films from a limited number of eyes. So, when I told them that there was a good Indian film that Mr. Sato saw, it was no use because it hadn't been submitted. The film festival had lost all its function, and it was the same thing as the Academy's Best International Film category now. There were films that were recommended by representative organizations in each country, and it was a division that was choosing from among them. So, I couldn't do any programming at all. Sometimes there was something very artistic and pointy about it that felt completely extreme, and then there was something like a completely normal children's movie. When I looked at the selection, I didn't really know who chose it.

So I thought it would be better to start over. I didn't have any experience with film festivals, but it's not interesting to watch from the side as an audience member. From the following year, I became a member of the selection committee, and I went to the Cannes Film Festival, the Hong Kong Film Festival, and things like that. In addition, there were various entries for the program, so I selected them properly as a programmer for the time being. I started doing that in 1992. In the beginning, there were people who said things like, "Why are there two Hong Kong films?" I said, "I did that because they're interesting." I mean, there was nothing to attract that kind of audience, so we did two Hong Kong films. It was in 1992 that we began to prepare the format of the film festival in that way. While doing that, I met Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien.

## Yuichiro Nakada

*Could you tell us more about meeting Hou Hsiao-Hsien?*

## Shozo Ichiyama

I programmed his *Puppet Master* as the opening film in the category I oversaw, and the next year I ended up doing a film with him called *Good Man, Good Woman*. The investors had suddenly left the project, and it was in trouble. I was asked if there might be any investment in Japan. I told Okuyama, the producer of Shochiku, that I would like to come back to my company for the time being, even if the film might be rejected. I told him about *Good Man, Good Woman*, and he said, "Okay, let's do it."

At that time, Shochiku had created a fund for international co-productions. In short, there was about 5 billion yen that had been set aside with the aim of co-producing with Hollywood. Talk of a remake of *The Yellow Handkerchief of Actual Happiness* had taken place between Universal and Shochiku. However the problem was, although it was a considerably large project for Shochiku, it was just one of many for Universal. So it depended on the decisions of a famous director or cast members, and it kept being neglected. So the fund was there, but it didn't have anything to invest in. Because of the

## Shozo Ichiyama

purpose of the fund, it couldn't be used for ordinary Japanese films. So there was 5 billion yen, and Hou Hsiao-Hsien asked us to invest 100 million yen, so it was not a large amount from the total. So the decision to invest was made easily.

In the end, Shochiku and Hou Hsiao-Hsien decided to produce three films together. I'm the producer of those films, so it was like I ended up doing an international co-production. I hadn't really set out to do international co-productions at all. At the beginning of my time at Shochiku, I was producing Japanese films. So I decided to produce an international co-production without any experience. Having said that, it is not like now when you have to procure the budget from various places. It was basically made just with Shochiku's investment and the Taiwanese government subsidy that Hou Hsiao-Hsien applied for, so it was simple.

In fact, there was no such thing as a production committee. The film fund I just mentioned was basically entrusted to Shochiku, so no one was going to object, especially when it comes to the content. The concept of a film fund hasn't taken root in Japan at all. There are film funds in Korea and other countries, but basically, we appoint people who say that if there is a return, it is fine. They don't say anything about the content. The fund manager is the one who proposes to everyone that Shochiku will do this project, and it will not be rejected unless there is something extraordinary. In that sense, *Good Man, Good Woman* started in a situation where no one was asking about the content, about the casting, about being able to use a Japanese government office, or anything like that. From there, there was a contract signed between Shochiku and Hou Hsiao-Hsien's company. Hou Hsiao-Hsien had the rights in Taiwan. Shochiku had rights outside Taiwan, and if the film turned a profit (though it did not) some of that was to be allocated to Hou Hsiao-Hsien. It also said the production cost should not go beyond the agreed amount. Of course, if it went over, it would be borne by Hou Hsiao-Hsien's company.

Therefore for Hou Hsiao-Hsien, if he kept it within the budget, he could make the film only with the subsidy. So, it was a contract where even if he didn't invest his own money, he could get the Taiwan rights for free. In Japan, I applied for a grant for international joint use from the Ministry of Culture, and although I did not earn a penny from it, I could invest it. The budget went over for the next one, *Goodbye, South, Goodbye*. So Hou Hsiao-Hsien I think found investors in Taiwan and covered it, but Shochiku did not give out anything other than the amount decided. Instead, all the rights to Taiwan were held by Hou Hsiao-Hsien. It was such a very simple contract. Also, the other factor is that it was Hou Hsiao-Hsien's own company, so basically if he said it was all good, it was easy to agree on things in that sense.

My start in international co-production began in that way. When it comes to sales, Shochiku had an international department, so rather than trying hard to find a sales agent, I told the company that it would be a good experience to sell at Shochiku. Generally, Japanese films weren't selling except for Kurosawa and Imamura etc. Even if we do a market screening of a Japanese film at Shochiku, people don't come and watch the screening. But when I told buyers that I was doing a movie with Hou Hsiao-Hsien, everyone came to the Shochiku booth and said that they wanted to buy it. I can't say it sold extremely well, but it was a moderate success in various ways.

### **Shozo Ichiyama**

Only with *Flowers of Shanghai* did we sell it to a French company by packaging the European rights. The reason for this is that it was quite a struggle. It was Hou Hsiao-Hsien, after all, and it was from that era, so I didn't have any e-mail at that time. I had a lot of still photos from the shooting in Taiwan, and I showed them in various places. So, we got into a scramble with about three companies, and in the end, we ended up giving all European rights to a French company for a very high price. Basically, I had intended to sell it at the Shochiku booth, so I didn't feel too much pressure to decide on a sales agent. But it was very easy in that respect, and there was a big company behind it.

### **Yuichiro Nakada**

*How did you end up working with Office Kitano?  
And tell us about encountering Jia Zhangke.*

### **Shozo Ichiyama**

Later, the president of Shochiku and producer Okuyama were dismissed. So the company decided that for a while they wouldn't do any more international co-productions and artistic films, and would only produce ordinary Japanese commercial films. Just then, I was approached by Office Kitano. I knew Mr. Mori, the president of Office Kitano, from working on *Violent Cop*. Office Kitano was originally a talent agency, but thanks to Mr. Kitano's becoming a film director, it started to produce films. There was a debut film released in 1998 starring Duncan and directed by Hiroshi Shimizu, who also was an assistant director for Takeshi. So they wanted to produce other films besides Kitano's work, and to do that, they needed some producers. So they asked if I would like to meet with him.

This is really a coincidence, but when I was doing the overseas sales for *Flowers of Shanghai* in 1998, I met Jia Zhangke in Berlin. *Xiao Wu* had been invited to the Forum section, and we happened to meet at a restaurant. At that time he was preparing a project called *Platform* that he really wanted to do, but it was difficult to secure funds in China, so he was looking for an overseas producer. We talked and I asked him to send us the script. So I asked President Mori if he was interested in international co-production, and he said he was very interested. Because of that, I quit Shochiku and joined Office Kitano. The first project was Jia Zhangke's *Platform*, so we finalized the script that year, and in October, at the Busan International Film Festival, Jia Zhangke, the producer on the Hong Kong side, President Mori and I all met each other. I suggested we secure half of the budget from Japan and the other half from Hong Kong and China.

However, Jia Zhangke was not able to get permission for the script, and in the end there was no Chinese investment. So, we ended up starting it with half of the budget. In that sense, *Platform* began with a production cost of less than 100 million yen, which is not so large, and we applied for various support programs as a follow-up. We applied to the French fund Aide aux cinémas du monde, though it had a different name then.

From there, we started collaborating with Jia Zhangke on a regular basis. At the same time, we were working with Samira Makhmalbaf, whose film *Apple* screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival. Other Iranian directors like Abolfazl Jalili were also looking for overseas funding because it was difficult to raise production costs in their own country.

### **Yuichiro Nakada**

*Was that due to censorship?*

### **Shozo Ichiyama**

There was of course censorship. Also, there was no arthouse movie market for such films. There was a point where even if I made a film that would be screened at a film festival like that, no one would go and see it. For Samira's *Blackboards*, Marco Mueller was the producer, and Benetton in Italy had invested quite a lot of money, so only about 10% of the investment came from Japan. But Jalili's *Delbaran* received 60% of its budget from Japan. The original budget was very low, and there were two projects with Iran. But with Jia Zhangke, Office Kitano continued to keep producing works of his for a while.

There was another company Bandai Visual, which is now Bandai Namco, which was the place that handled the videos of Kitano's works. *Platform* also got some investment from Bandai Visual and its partner company. So, there were times when we had to be careful about losses, but we also limited the amount of investment quite a bit. However, as for the content, given the trust in the authorship of Jia Zhangke, they didn't have anything to say about it. Bandai Visual invested because of its relationship with Office Kitano, so we did not interfere with the content.

This is not something that I was involved with directly, but Kitano-san's Office Kitano made films in that way, with many companies joining it. There is Office Kitano, and then Bandai Visual, and a radio station called Tokyo FM, and TV Asahi came in as well. Basically, those investments were made from the trust for Office Kitano. If you made the film under other a production committee system, various people would see the rushed and give various opinions, or have suggestions about casting at the script stage. That makes the director exhausted. And of course the producer as well. In the case of Office Kitano, we couldn't work with investors who were likely to complain, so we asked them to trust us, because it was Kitano's work anyway. So we often didn't get caught up in the evils of the Japanese production committee, which is quite exceptional. Usually, when a TV station comes in, they ask you to stop doing this, or you will be in trouble if you broadcast something like this on TV etc. In that case, you will have to raise a fuss. Office Kitano did it without those kinds of restrictions.

### **Yuichiro Nakada**

*Some of Kitano's works are quite violent, aren't they?*

### **Shozo Ichiyama**

That's right. In that sense, TV Asahi was reluctant to talk about *Outrage*, so they took it to TV Tokyo instead. This was done by Mr. Mori, not me. I think there are various restrictions when a TV station enters production. As a result, *Outrage* aired in prime time on TV Tokyo and there were no complaints. In that respect, there is a difference between major TV stations like TV Asahi and TV Tokyo which more of an independent style channel.

The World by Jia Zhangke received funds from quite a lot of different companies. Bandai Visual also included, and so many others such as TV Asahi, Tokyo FM and Dentsu. Everyone was surprised that such a company joined in, and in fact those were companies that invested in *Zatoichi*, which made a lot of money. So everyone was participating in it feeling that they couldn't refuse. Of course, Bitter's End is included because they had been distributing Jia Zhangke's works. The amount of investment is not so much per company. For *The World*, in terms of the ratio of production costs, the investment by Japan was much larger than the amount invested by China. It was about 60 million from Japan, 10 million from France, and about 7 million from China.

**Shozo Ichiyama**

After that, it was a completely watershed moment for China. Until then, the money that could be raised under the name of Jia Zhangke was limited. His films leading up to *The World* had been banned and could not be released, so there was no way to secure funding from China. *The World* passed the censorship for the first time, and it was funded by the Shanghai Film Studio in China. Of course, it was not a hit, but *The World* was his first release, and when *Still Life* won the Golden Lion Award in Venice, there was a film investment boom in China around that time. In the latter half of the 2000s, more and more cinema complexes began to open in China, and then the market for movies suddenly expanded. The turning point was around 2006, when *Still Life* was made. From there, Jia Zhangke's later films only had about 10 million yen in Japanese funding, and all the rest was funded by China. After *Mountains May Depart*, we also got funding from France. But only 10 million yen was invested by Japan in *24 City* and *A Touch of Sin*. 10 million was the only amount that could be recouped for Jia Zhangke's films. The cumulative funds of *The World*, 60 million yen, had not been recouped at all, so Japan was only able to cover about 10 million. However, the rest could be secured in China.

*24 City* was made with a budget of about 100 million yen. So about 90 million yen came from China. It's because of a famous actor like Joan Chen partly. Another reason is that Jia Zhangke suddenly became a hot topic by winning the Golden Lion in Venice, and the film investment boom in China had just begun. Since then, Jia Zhangke's money procurement in Japan has been small. It's just a matter of putting everything together, and now it's all about China. When it comes to our role, of course we were told about upcoming projects, and we talked it over in the sense that that if it was interesting, we should do it. When the script came out, what was needed from me was to give a sense of foreign audiences' perspective, and if they could see and understand it. Actually Jia Zhangke could have raised that other 10 million in China, so he didn't need to secure it in Japan. So why am I credited as a producer anyway? At the script and editing stages I was often consulted, and I felt that I was there for that.

Also in Europe, in the case of *A Touch of Sin*, the sales agency was decided before Cannes, so I did that negotiation. The same went for *Mountains May Depart* and negotiating MK2's investment. So one of my roles was to negotiate with Europe in this way.

Jia Zhangke is very conscious about making universal films that can reach not only Chinese audiences but also the international audience. That doesn't mean that he makes a movie only thinking about something that people around the world will enjoy. He creates what he wants. However, I feel like I've been engaged with finding the elements in his scripts that international audiences may not understand when they see it.

**Shozo Ichiyama**

Yes. There are some parts that if you are Chinese, you can understand it roughly, but when foreigners look at it, they can't understand it at all. For example, there is a way of saying sister, but often your sister is not your real sister. There is no blood connection at

**Shozo Ichiyama**

It's the same as saying that they are the big brothers of the Yakuza. And if you translate it all as 'brother', the Chinese understand, but for foreigners, what do you think when you see people who are not related by blood at all call each other brother or sister? This sort of detail is something that a filmmaker can't understand without the eyes of foreigners, to a certain extent. If you translate it as brother or sister, it will be a bit of a mess. Also in terms of artistic aspects, I think there are some other things that I can suggest in terms of rhythm. So I would say that it should be shortened a little, but I think there were quite a few times when he said things like, "I don't understand foreigners" when it came to artistic advice of that kind.

These days, when people tell me that I raised that kind of money for *Mountains May Depart* or *Ash is Purest White*, I say to them that I'm not doing anything. It's like money that is being raised in the name of Jia Zhangke. Now he thinks differently about casting, too. In the case of *Mountains May Depart*, the Taiwanese A-listed actress Sylvia Chang acted in the third part. For *Ash is Purest White*, a star who often appears in action movies called Liao Fan played a role as a gangster. In the past, there was a time when Jia Zhangke stubbornly didn't want to use professional actors. But, as he gets older, he sees a lot of things. To make a film on that scale, you must use a certain level of cast. It doesn't change his shooting style. It's a slow story with long takes as usual, and it's not a story that will make Chinese audiences happy, or become a big hit. But, if you must spend a certain budget, he uses actors that every Chinese knows. He does it consciously. It's the case with any director, for example, director Kore-eda. If *Shoplifters* had had no stars, it would be difficult to raise the money. The content is not standard entertainment at all, but there are people in the ensemble whom everyone knows, such as Kirin Kiki, Sakura Ando, Lily Frankie, etc. Kore-eda is also conscious of that. Jia Zhangke is the same. I didn't force him to do anything, and if he were a director who didn't listen to me, I probably wouldn't have worked with him for so long. No matter how wonderful the films are, if an investor loses a lot every time, it's not worth it. But he can continue to work because he oversees all of this properly.

It's tough as a producer.

From the beginning, Jia wanted to aim for a local release of *The World*, so he used a professional actor for the first time, a guy named Chen Taisheng who played the heroine's boyfriend. Chen Taisheng is a pretty good actor, but there was a difference in acting styles because there were amateurs around him. So, he was really frustrated on set. I think it looks okay if we watch it, but when Chinese people watch the film, they feel that the quality of the acting is different. So basically, it's difficult for professional actors and amateur actors to work together. Jia Zhangke probably understands that to some extent. So, rather than forcing himself to use only amateurs after that, I think we are choosing people who can perform with professional actors, or having professional actors who can perform with amateurs, so that they can meet face to face.

Originally with *Xiao Wu* or *Platform* he used non-professionals as they were. Now,

**Shozo Ichiyama**

I think he can probably operate using all professional actors. But he hasn't gone that far. He continues doing it with a system that uses amateurs. But for securing the production budget and marketing in China, he must include some famous people to some extent. He seems to understand that, so it's not like the producer is telling him to do it.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*So you're more like a curator or a salesperson?*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

I'd say an advisor. Also, when it comes to overseas relations, I certainly have more experience and connections, so I feel like I'm doing my part there.

While working with Jia Zhangke I also shot a Japanese film, Atsushi Funahashi's *Big River* which was about a road trip to the United States by Joe Odagiri. Then I made *Chasuke's Journey* and *Mr. Long* with director Sabu. During my time at Office Kitano, I began to work in this way on some films by Japanese directors. But I didn't have to do anything like a normal entertainment movie. There were some things that I felt like I'd do with the attitude of aiming for a film festival if I was going to do it. I didn't propose any sort of entertainment film. So in the early days, I was producing works by Jia Zhangke and Iranian directors, but I started working with Japanese directors partway through.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*Was there a particular change in policy?*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

That's right. It's not a matter of changing the policy or limiting it to foreign directors. Office Kitano had a previous project with some Japanese directors, but it didn't work out, and the first thing that came to fruition was *Big River*. Originally, Kitano was doing it on his own, and there was talk about doing a film by a young Japanese director. But that didn't happen.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*Mr. Funahashi recently released the film Company Retreat.*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

Well, it's already mid-career for him. I did three films with Mr. Funahashi: *Big River*, *Cold Bloom*, and *Lovers on Borders*. We made three films in collaboration with Portugal during the Kitano period.

In the process, *Big River* and *Lovers on Borders* received grants from the Ministry of Culture Japan, and Mr. Funahashi came up with the feature-length project *Cold Bloom* that would only cost us 2.5 million yen on the theme of a movie set in Hitachi City. But the truth is that we made it with a production cost of about 10 million yen. The reason is that at that time, we had funds from Bandai Visual, Bandai Building, and then Shochiku's Satellite Theater, but if it was about 2.5 million from everyone, in short, we could issue a decision by the department manager. So we could make it immediately, but it became quite difficult if the budget rose beyond that because a meeting needed to be held. I was trying to make 10 million from 7.5 million including Office Kitano's share and 2.5 million from Hitachi City. I applied for the Asian Cinema Fund of the Busan Film Festival and got a post-production grant. There was no budget for the post-production, and he had planned to do the sound work at the home of a sound recorder. But somehow thanks to the Asian Cinema Fund in Busan, a high spec post-production studio in Seoul was prepared for us.

**Shozo Ichiyama**

There were conditions, and in short, they didn't give us cash. Instead, if the post-production were done in Korea, the fee would be covered. That's why we didn't do it in Japan or other countries. So the director and DoP went over there during the post-production process, and we went to the studio that CJ owns, and in the end it was a very high-quality result that was even higher than if we'd done it in Japan.

Office Kitano is not like Shochiku which can spend a lot of money, so it made sense to use those overseas funds as much as possible. That was not very common among Japanese filmmakers; there was almost no one who was willing to do it, in fact. Most of the time, filmmakers managed to secure the budget in Japan. Even if they applied overseas, the paperwork and preparing the documents was quite confusing and difficult. So there were not many people doing it, but I received a French fund for Jia Zhangke's film and an Asian Cinema Fund for Mr. Funahashi's film, out of necessity.

As for *Chasuke's Journey*, there was a 30 million yen subsidy from Okinawa Prefecture, which involves a screening process for films that are shot on location in Okinawa, and I received it. Regarding *Mr. Long*, I was told that if I shot some scenes in Kaohsiung City, I would get a subsidy. So I applied for it and received about 7 million yen. Even for Sabu's films, it is quite difficult to find investors in Japan normally, so we are using such grants.

Also, at the time of *Mr. Long*, I had a partner in Germany, a company that had been distributing Sabu's work for a long time. Given the situation, I basically applied to a German post-production fund, and ended up doing the post-production in Berlin.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*Is your partner in Germany a producer?*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

That was Stefan Hall. When he came to Tokyo FILMEX, he asked me what I was doing now, and I told him that I was producing a film by Sabu. So through him, I applied for a grant in Germany. That money is to be used for post-production, and the application used to be quite smooth. But the competition has gotten so fierce that it is difficult to get it even in Germany. At this point I was not with Office Kitano, but there were a few movies by Sabu set up at LDH after Office Kitano was dissolved. I produced those with Stefan, but because we couldn't get a grant, we had no choice but to cover the production costs ourselves. In the past, I was able to get it, but now there are so many applications for that grant from all over the world, it is difficult to receive it without shooting over there. Those applications receive priority. Now it basically comes with the condition that you shoot in Germany.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*Was all of the post-production covered in the shooting budget?*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

Basically, this was in anticipation of post-production. With Jia Zhangke's *Platform*, we ended up spending all the money we had raised in the shooting stage, so I applied to the French fund as a follow-up. The example of Mr. Funahashi just now is the same, I was planning to cover everything up to the post-production with a budget of 10 million yen, but because of various unexpected expenses that came out in the shooting, it ran out completely. And to use the example of the first film with Sabu I mentioned earlier, post-production was covered by a German company that invested in it with its own sister company.

**Shozo Ichiyama** There are cases where the production costs go over budget. The post-production for *Lovers on Borders* was done at a post-production studio in New York called Cineric that has funded quite a few films. They let us use their post-production studio in exchange for the U.S. rights to the film. Though I don't think they were able to recoup much in the United States. I don't think it was released there theatrically. The first films I did with them were Amir Naderi's *Cut*, starring Hidetoshi Nishijima, and a documentary of Ryuichi Sakamoto as well as *Ainu Mosir* with the director Takeshi Fukunaga. They have been investing in quite a few films lately.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *Maybe one trend is that they make money elsewhere and then invest in it with a substantially low amount.*

**Shozo Ichiyama** At that time, it was decided in advance that it would be done at Cineric, and there was other money raised from the Ministry of Culture, Portuguese grants, television rights, etc. What was special about *Lovers on the Borders* is there was no Japanese production committee. Since we only needed marketing expenses, we just had the Asahi Shimbun pay for the publicity. Besides that, the only expense was the investment of Office Kitano and the subsidy from the Ministry of Culture. Then the TV rights were sold in advance, and all the rest, such as Cineric's post-production support and the Portuguese government's subsidies followed. So, it was arranged in this way first, and there was no so-called committee system at all.

After all, when working with private investors, there were times when they had a lot of comments about the casting and the content. I talked with a few other companies at the planning stage, but they showed a lot of reluctance, and there were many times when I was told that this was a little too difficult, so I decided to do it without it then. We covered it with a production cost of about 100 million yen, but we did it in the form I just mentioned with almost no other companies' investments. However, we had no budget for marketing expenses, so I brought it to the Asahi Shimbun, saying I could make sure that the movie was completed and released, so please bear only the advertising expenses.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *Was that at the completion stage?*

**Shozo Ichiyama** I think it was before it was completed. The editing was almost over and I was ready to show it to a certain extent, but I thought that the marketing expenses may have to be covered by Office Kitano in a worst case scenario, so I tried to get that covered. One of the problems with co-productions is what to do about Japan's marketing expenses, which is a different story.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *That's an important issue.*

**Shozo Ichiyama** Nowadays, it's almost impossible for distributors to pay the P&A costs in Japan. This seems very strange to Europeans, because what Europeans do is to have the distribution company invest in the form of a minimum guarantee, and of course if the distributor bears some kind of burden for the advertising expenses, the distributor will first recoup the advertising expenses that they spend. But in the case of Japan, it became a question of whether you could get an MG from the distribution company, and there are quite a lot of times when distributors say they cannot even bear the cost of advertising. I think this

**Shozo Ichiyama** system was probably created in the 1990s. If there's a production committee, the budget must include the advertising expenses. When it came to *Chasuke's Journey*, I negotiated with Shochiku to pay the P&A. However, Shochiku's investment amount was not that large, and as I just said, it included subsidies from Okinawa. In the past, it was common sense that such a distribution company would bear the advertising expenses. Now, basically it should be procured by the committee.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *Is that related to the Japanese economy?*

**Shozo Ichiyama** I think it's because there are many cases where films don't hit their mark. In short, they're very concerned that the advertising expenses may not be recovered, and that they are in the red as it is. Ultimately, it is not easy for the distribution company to bear that risk alone.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *Is there any difference in Europe that allows them to do it with an MG?*

**Shozo Ichiyama** No, I think it's probably a habit. This was the case in Japan until the 1980s. The advertising expenses were covered by the distributors. For example, when it was decided that if a film of some kind was to be made in Shochiku, several companies would work on this committee, and it was common knowledge that Shochiku would bear the advertising costs, and once that was secured, the recoupment of production costs would begin later. Somewhere in the 1990s, that trend changed. So the big companies began asking the production committee to procure all of it.

If you tell them that it's a very independent film and that they can spend just 5 million yen in advertising expenses, they might pay for it. I didn't do anything more than that. I made trailers, posters, and flyers, and that's about it. But if 10 million or so is to be spent on advertising, no one will cover that cost. I guess we must secure that amount at the production stage. After Office Kitano was dissolved, there was a Kazakh co-production called

*The Horse Thieves. Roads of Time*, and we signed a production contract with Kazakhstan. So we made a 30 million yen investment in it, but in the Japanese committee, the contract needed to include advertising expenses, so we had no choice but to make a heavy contract. The Kazakh side cannot afford to bear the cost of Japan's P&A, but they had to include the cost of P&A in Kazakhstan. Similarly, the Japanese side had to write the contract to include the advertising expenses on the Japanese side. That kind of gap is quite large internationally.

**Yuichiro Nakada** *About 30% of the production cost can be spent on advertising.*

**Shozo Ichiyama** It depends on what you do, there are times when you should reduce it. But if you take a TV slot or something big, it will cost you a lot. For major Japanese releases, there are many films that cost the same amount in marketing as the production cost. If it's an independent film, it's probably a little less than 10 million yen. It's like doing a so-called one-house roadshow, so in the case of Jia Zhangke's films, we do it with 10 million yen for Japanese rights plus 10 million for marketing. It is recoupable if the box office revenue exceeds 40 or 50 million yen.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*In the case of Jia Zhangke, if it only earns 30 million, will the rest be recouped through ancillary markets or something?*

**Shozo Ichiyama**

It's hard. Production costs are increasing steadily while the market for Jia Zhangke is not expanding in Japan. So the investment amount should be about 10 million yen. For that amount, investors will try it even if they lost a little, but if you needed to secure 30 million from Japan, no one would get on board. That's the way it is. It's better not to make too big demands of it.

**Yuichiro Nakada**

*Thank you very much for sharing such an insightful and fruitful discussion with us today.*

*- April 14, 2022*

by

After graduating from University of California at Santa Barbara as a physics major, **Yuichiro Nakada (yuichiro0224@gmail.com)** studied astrophysics at Munich University Graduate School in Germany. While working as a research assistant in JAXA, and National Astronomical Observatory in Japan, he took a screenwriter's workshop in Eiga 24ku. In 2018, his debut short film *Goodbye my Son* was an official selection in more than 70 film festivals around the world. In 2019, he participated in the Jidaigeki workshop in Kyoto Filmmakers' Lab as a soundman in the Shochiku team. During the filmmaking workshop, he collaborated with the Shochiku production team and other selected members all over the world among 300 applicants. In 2022, his second short film *Gift* which portrays the family-like bond between a Syrian refugee and a solitary Japanese boy will be released. In 2022, he studied at the International Film Business Academy in Busan Asian Film School with other aspiring filmmakers in Asia.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# FOO FEI LING

Producer - Ghost Grrrl Pictures  
Malaysia

Interview by Tan Cher Kian (CK)

FOO Fei Ling is a multi-hyphenated filmmaker with experiences in various roles within the film production ecosystem. Fresh from wrapping up the shooting for her latest film *Tiger Stripes* directed by Amanda Nell Eu and produced by their company Ghost Grrrl Pictures, Fei Ling spoke to CK on her experience in the film industry as an actress, and her recent exciting adventure with co-production for *Tiger Stripes*.

Based in Malaysia, Ghost Grrrl Pictures is a young film company producing female-centric stories coming from the Southeast Asia. The aim of the company is to represent strong, feared and misunderstood females in cinema – from colossal monsters to tough little girls who just cannot fit in.

**CK Tan**

*Can you share with me a little bit about yourself?*

**Fei Ling**

Okay. Talking about myself is quite hard but I feel at this stage, it's easier now. I'm a producer. I've been in the industry for about 12 years. I am based in Malaysia and I've been involved in many roles; as producer, director and I also worked inhouse in a production company too. About three to four years ago, I started my own company with my work partner, Amanda Nell Eu and we developed our film, *Tiger Stripes* which we just finished production.

Actually, for a period of time, I have had problems telling other people "what do I do". It's not easy to define myself in just one role or jobscope because, as freelancers, we are doing so many things.

**CK Tan**

*I think that's interesting especially now that everyone is multi-hyphenated. Just now, you also mentioned you have been doing different roles in the industry. So maybe share a little bit about what you did from the earlier days?*

**Fei Ling**

I mean, back in college and university, most people will have a certain expectation of what you should do after finishing your studies, but I somehow just didn't feel that kind of passion or I didn't feel like I have a story that must be told by me. You know, sometimes when I look at other people, they have this burning desire to express themselves or tell a story, but I just didn't feel that way. And at that time I think as a director or writer, you needed to possess that kind of burning desire and motivation to keep pushing yourself to perfect the craft.

So I didn't really spend much time there and when I ventured out of the campus, I did something else. That's why I got into acting in some of the indie films. For me that was quite interesting because those who were involved during that time did not have a formal background in film. These include some of the pioneers of the Malaysian New Wave such as Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Woo Ming Jin and their gang. And I think they knew me through the film screening club, Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia. They saw my short film. And I think at that time, Ming Jin needed a ghost for his film. So he cast me as the ghost. Yeah, it's the first ever film that he made in Malaysia, actually.

**CK Tan**

*So, to backtrack a little bit. Fei Ling, when you mentioned about the burning desire as a director or writer, I believe you are referring to your time during your study in college. What were you studying in college that time?*

**Fei Ling**

I was studying in Hanxin Academy in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur. And then I went to further my study in Taiwan, it's actually a mixed-discipline kind of course. It's called Communication Art. So it's a lot of film theory, film production and so on and so forth. I was more focused on film.

So after I graduated, I came back because before I went to Taiwan, I got to know the group of filmmakers I mentioned before. Though I knew them for a very short time, it was very important in my formative years around early 2000. During that time, there was nothing much going on in Malaysia. I went to Taiwan in 2004 and Yasmin Ahmad hasn't even released *Sepet* yet. Nothing much happened in in the local cinema. I just didn't see

**Fei Ling** what I can do in Malaysia actually. At that time I was thinking if I come back, I may have to work at a TV station. A lot of my college mates or schoolmates came back from Taiwan and started careers in TV and journalism. But then knowing these bunch of filmmakers allowed me to see some other kind of possibilities. And the way they do things, it's really... like throwing a newborn into water. Let you swim by yourself.

**CK Tan** *So you chose to come back, even though at that time you could have continued working in Taiwan which has a vibrant film industry.*

**Fei Ling** Yes, Taiwan was doing very well at that time. There were some new movie companies formed by young people and then they were doing successful films like *Blue Gate Crossing*. And you can also see the dawn of the new era, like the emergence of YouTubers and online personalities. But I just didn't feel like staying on and working in Taiwan or making a Taiwanese film. I am actually not a particularly patriotic person, but still I decided to come back. I felt like I really wanted to make a Malaysian film. I felt like Malaysian stories matter to me. I feel for a director like Abbas Kiorastami, when he makes a French film, you feel like something is missing. I am not sure if I explained this well, but that's how I felt at that time.

**CK Tan** *And you came back to continue working with this group of Malaysian filmmakers you met before you graduated?*

**Fei Ling** Yeah. And I am not really a good planner so it's better for me to just explore and follow the flow. I came back and then Da Huang Pictures was very busy at that time, because of the success of *Flower In The Pocket* by Liew Seng Tat. So they had lots of things going on and everyone was quite busy. So I contacted Tan Chui Mui, I recommended one of my good friends to work in Da Huang. She's from Sarawak. And then Mui was making a series of short films called *All My Failed Attempts*. I was one of the actresses. Then she asked me to work in her company. I agreed because I never wanted to work in a corporate, nine-to-five environment. So that didn't leave me with many choices. So I spent about three years working in Da Huang. Maybe too long, but the thing is, I'm lazy.

**CK Tan** *You started with acting, was that something that you enjoy?*

**Fei Ling** Actually, if the character is good, acting is something I enjoy. But the thing is, there are really not many good female characters. Or maybe there are also not many good male characters too, but certainly more options compared to the female ones because if you look at a lot of the films, the female characters are mostly prostitutes, mothers or rebellious teens. It is quite limited. Or maybe good scripts are also not easy to find.

**CK Tan** *So moving on to your experience working in production. Was that during the time when you were in Da Huang?*

**Fei Ling** Yes, it was during my time with Da Huang and also with other companies. But during that time, Da Huang was super busy. In fact, I didn't even start from the bottom with the PA job. I remembered my first project in Da Huang was Location Manager. In a way, it was also a bit of Production Manager as well. That was quite scary for someone who just came back from Taiwan. I had never come back for semester break during those four years of

**Fei Ling** study in Taiwan. Actually the reason was that I was just lazy actually. As I didn't drive at that time, doing location was just crazy.

**CK Tan** *Can we go back a little bit? During the four years of study in Taiwan, were you working on some related jobs when you didn't come back during semester break?*

**Fei Ling** Yes, I did some jobs. But I didn't really do anything related to film. Initially I was thinking maybe I need to do something related, so maybe TV, and I did. But then TV in Taiwan is really very overwhelming. And I just hated it. I ended up getting myself busy with stuff that is not related to my studies.

So I did classical and medieval study. Latin and Greek. It's language, culture, history and it was very interesting.

**CK Tan** *So you started your production work in Da Huang. What other roles did you take on besides Location Manager and Production Manager?*

**Fei Ling** Basically whatever Da Huang needs me to do, as there were not many people around and they were all very busy. A lot of the jobs were also assisting the director. Most of the time, there were tasks like developing researching. Actually as Da Huang produced many films then, and they were all screening in festivals, I needed to handle A to Z of everything like publicity, print traffic, dealing with all the festivals' communication etc. Sometimes maybe people wanted to buy the film which I needed to handle, and also dealing with distribution. It sounds like big things. Actually we had never done this before so we didn't know how to do it; we were just figuring it out along the way.

**CK Tan** *Interesting. Though in hindsight, do you think it happened because there were no other people who knew how to do it, or there was no budget to hire someone?*

**Fei Ling** Generally there was no budget to get people to do it. I mean, of course, you can always ask for favours or you can hire interns, but it's just not sustainable in the long term to keep doing that.

**CK Tan** *So having all these hands-on experiences equipped you to move on to your next phase of being a producer. How do you see the role of a producer?*

**Fei Ling** I aspire to be a creative producer. So I don't only work on the financing and all that. I mean, if that story is something that I don't like, or I don't agree with, I wouldn't produce it. Because it just takes so much from you. It better be something that you really like and enjoy. The person you work with is also very important.

**CK Tan** *So, when did you start producing?*

**Fei Ling** It's all about the timing and opportunities that were available. I mean, for example *Tiger Stripes*, the project I am producing for Amanda. I had already known her for more than 10 years before that, since her final year project, and we were colleagues for some years in another company. She's just someone whom I feel comfortable working with. And I love her vision. And I wouldn't say I am a feminist because I haven't really thought too much

**Fei Ling** about it. But personally, I always – I only discovered this later – enjoy the stories by female authors more; be it movies, books or even sometimes songs. So that’s why I think working with Amanda on *Tiger Stripes* has just happened very naturally. But it’s definitely a huge leap to be a producer for a project of this scale. If you look at my previous portfolio, everything I had done was really small scale. I have never imagined I would do something commercial, but this is just beyond anything I have done before. And of course in the very beginning, I imagined it to be very contained and had no idea it would snowball into what it is today. So basically I had to grow fast and step up.

**CK Tan** *When you say a huge leap – is this the first feature you have ever produced, or the leap refers to the scale of the project?*

**Fei Ling** It’s the scale of the project and the fact that it’s produced by our own company so it definitely feels a bit different. For both of us, it just feels like “Oh my god!” There is so much adulting to do, like, we have to really figure out all this accounting, auditing, contracts and everything else totally on our own.

**CK Tan** *So it’s like being forced to grow up because the project grows bigger too. So you need your company, your support system and everything to be proper and ready. Is this the adulting you were talking about?*

**Fei Ling** Yes. I mean it’s not like we haven’t done all this before. It’s like when you are working with other filmmakers, and you just feel like working with your mentors. You’re still doing essentially more or less the same job, but this time it’s like the first time you really have totally full agency.

**CK Tan** *So for Tiger Stripes were you already developing the project together with Amanda from the start? How did it come about?*

**Fei Ling** Amanda was finally ready to make a feature film, because she had this short film that was doing very well in the festivals. She asked me whether I was interested to work together with her. I guess that’s how it started. So we started working on the script and talked about the world of the story. Yeah, because the story is like a coming-of-age type of story so there was a lot of talking and sharing experiences.

**CK Tan** *So, is this the template of how to go about being a creative producer?*

**Fei Ling** I think this is just one of the ways and I think my example was a bit more passive because as a creative producer, you have to be very active and go out there to assemble your team. I think that is quite difficult in Malaysia because we don’t have many good screenwriters. So this is the problem that everybody is having. All the directors have to write because nobody else can write for them. And we don’t have a healthy and sustainable pool of filmmakers for a producer to actually pick from. Actually that is the situation in very mature industries like in the UK or Hollywood, but actually in Malaysia this model doesn’t really work that well unless you only want to develop a certain kind of commercial film, very formulaic. That is okay too. And people are doing it. But that’s not what I want to do.

**Fei Ling** And also another thing is, how do you as a producer decide what story you want to tell? And how do you evaluate if the story has a market? You know, for example in the EU they have all these studies and data that you can actually evaluate and access who is your audience. What kind of audience is watching what kind of films? What are their social backgrounds? What are their economic backgrounds? Gender? Then you have something for you to build your project on.

There are some solid data that you can present to your funders and investors. But here, we have nothing like this. So anything you say, you have to pick the reference from outside the country. Then it’s actually also very difficult for the producer if you want to do the process properly. Of course, you can just tell it as a story, as you know, it’s a creative job at the end of the day but this is the problem we have here. It’s not like there is no solution. People are still making films. But you can see for example out of 100 films a year, how many really make money or how many of them know what they are doing?

**CK Tan** *This is interesting, the part about the data. So we are making something for an audience. So of course, you want to know who is your audience and what they like, etc. All this will help us convince our funders or investors in making our movie. But is that all there is?*

**Fei Ling** I think filmmakers must be aware of this. Filmmaking is not like any other art. But I don’t know much about many other art forms. I just imagine as a painter, you paint and it’s between you and your dealers or agents. But filmmaking involves just too much money. And not everyone can be like Tsai Ming Liang or Apichatpong. Two years ago in Berlinale, Wim Wenders gave a talk. He was so humble. He was saying he had problems getting funds not just because of how competitive it is and how many filmmakers there are today, but also mainly his way of working is without a script. So you know to get funding, the kind of presentation that you need to do, it just makes it very difficult even for Wim Wenders. Sometimes when we’re so small and new, we assume these kind of famous filmmakers can just get money easily. It’s not really true and, of course with that kind of money, it comes with a lot of responsibilities and it’s not just art.

Also, when we talk about data, it’s not just about giving the audience what they want or knowing what they might like, but also to try new things because that’s what the film business always does right? All those blockbusters like *Ghostbusters* or *Back to the Future* for example. When the filmmakers were making them, no one believed in them.

**CK Tan** *You mentioned a few things here, which I think are very important. Most commercial movies are made by big companies and corporations, so in a way the accountability is taken care of by the corporate responsibility to their owners or shareholders. But if you’re using public money, for example, the responsibility is heavier. So it’s not just about making a movie.*

**Fei Ling** Yeah, you were talking about how the corporation has its responsibility, but sometimes some people are getting money from angel investors, and that’s personal money so it’s actually quite a heavy responsibility.

I mean, even when you are making arthouse films that are essentially not that

**Fei Ling** commercial, you have to think about the artistic value of that. You really have to push for it and develop it. And also, there's a limit to certain things. For example, if we say we can know better or have better data, maybe we can also judge better. You even can make money back or just break even. I'm not talking about making a huge profit. I mean, let's say if we were using a public grant and we made some profit, we can actually channel that profit back to the next arthouse film. It's not just about one person or one company, but what if we together can do things better?

**CK Tan** *Yes, speaking about doing things better. You and Amanda must be doing things in a much better way as Tiger Stripes has been getting many grants and went to many prestigious labs. How many co-production countries are involved and how are you managing it?*

**Fei Ling** Right now it is a co-production with seven countries. There are six other producers. I don't really manage it. Because, you know, it's like a roundtable kind of relationship.

**CK Tan** *So co-production. What do you think about it?*

**Fei Ling** I actually quite enjoy it because I like to work with people from different cultures and perspectives. I learned so much from all these colleagues, all the co-producers. It just makes the project better with what they bring to the table. It sounds very diplomatic but I really mean every word. And also, if you think about the reality in Malaysia, if you want to, even if it's a commercial project or if you want to build something sustainable, you might also have to get something from outside of Malaysia. Not just the funding, but also the distribution and the understanding of the market; both local and international.

Though it looks complicated, coproductions have a lot of benefits and in Malaysia because we sorely lack them, these benefits become necessities. I don't think I can make the film without my co-producers. It's not just about money but a lot of non-monetary things they bring to the table.

**CK Tan** *That's really good to hear and I can't wait to watch Tiger Stripes. I want to ask you one last question. Any particular project you want to do, or things that you want to do? It can be a film or it can be some topics or a story?*

**Fei Ling** I think now my focus is obviously female stories, but nothing in particular so far. I mean, at this moment, really nothing else but *Tiger Stripes*. I cannot and I don't like to juggle between projects. It's very difficult for me to think about other things at the same time. Actually, it just feels like I'm not giving enough.

**CK Tan** *Based on what I heard, you definitely did a lot! Best wishes for the post-production and thanks again for agreeing to do this interview with me.*

**Fei Ling** Thank you for having me.

*- 16 April, 2022*

**by Tan Cher Kian, CK (tancherkian@gmail.com)** is a Bornean-Sabahan Malaysian who leaped from oil-and-gas engineering to become a theatre practitioner in 2018. He started as a stage performer/writer due to his affinity with his mother tongue Cantonese in the evolving Singaporean work of *My Grandfather's Road* (2017 – current). He produced two short films by Putri Purnama Sugua, *House Without A Ground* (2019) and *Here I Am* (2019). Founder of Siring Siring Production and also the Producer of The Instant Café Theatre Company (ICT), a mainstay in the Malaysian theatre scene, CK is interested in works that break down barriers yet build bridges, and has a soft spot for non-official languages.



# AMIR MUHAMMAD

Founder of Kuman Pictures

Malaysia

Interview by Lee Choi Kin, Joey

Amir Muhammad is a producer and director known for *Lips to Lips* (2000), *The Big Durian* (2003) and *Malaysian Gods* (2009). *The Big Durian* won a Dragons and Tigers Award special citation at the 2004 Vancouver International Film Festival and a New Asian Currents special mention at the 2003 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. He was also a member of the International Jury for the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in 2008.

Several of his works have been screened at international film festivals including the Sundance Film Festival and the Berlin International Film Festival. However, two of his films – *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* and *The Last Communist* have been banned in Malaysia. He is also a well-known publisher in Malaysia, having launched Matahari Books and Buku FIXI in 2007 and 2011 respectively. After taking a few years' break from filmmaking, he recently established Kuman Pictures and has produced five films in the last three years. His low-budget film *Roh* was selected to represent Malaysia in the Best International Feature Film category at the 93rd Academy Awards.

Joey Lee

*How do you first get involved in film?*

Amir Muhammad

It all started when I was in the university. I took film studies, which is a very theoretical minor, and I did attend filmmaking courses. I got involved in scriptwriting, and then I made my first movie in the year 2000. So we did a full-length movie using a digital camera, it's called *Lips to Lips*. It wasn't meant for theatrical release at that time, really, but that's how I first got involved in film.

Joey Lee

*Do you not want to direct anymore? Why choose only producing?*

Amir Muhammad

It's sort of hard to direct when you are focusing on other people's films. I find it's good for now just to focus on other people movies, so that I can do what I want to do. The films that I directed before were usually very low budget and personal. They aren't meant to be commercial, but just something to show to friends or at festivals, which I think is not a sustainable way. It's not financially rewarding either.

If I decide to go back to directing, I'd prefer to take a "compromised" path, which means it's maybe still sellable. That's the way we started Kuman Pictures, where the films' production costs are low, but they have good production values and are sellable to any platform.

Joey Lee

*What prompted you to start Kuman Pictures?*

Amir Muhammad

I started Kuman Pictures after not doing any filmmaking for a long time because I thought filmmaking involves too many people. I don't like the fact that too many people become involved, causing too much interference, especially when you have a certain amount of budget. So I went into book publishing with FIXI, where fewer people are involved. But the basic principle is the same – story development, create the work, package it and market it. So, Kuman Pictures is the perfect blend of these both – a small manageable team and a focus on storytelling.

Joey Lee

*You mentioned before you don't like having too many people involved in your projects. Can you share us more on the reason or difficulties?*

Amir Muhammad

The more people, the more hassle, the more compromises. If it's a small team, it's much "purer" to the original intention. The intention behind making a film is important. That's the reason why I don't like to work with a huge team and a big budget. It's complicated. I just want to maintain my pure intention to make a good film. For example, if a film has a budget of over MYR 1 million, there will be more involvement and interference. When you work with a big company, they will request actors with a certain number of followers. They want to stay in the safe zone, without much risk. It's a film business, after all. Once a while, there will still be a good result, but usually they just follow a template based on past performance.

Joey Lee

*Can you share with us your strategy and direction for Kuman Pictures?*

Amir Muhammad

Kuman Pictures has a very simple strategy to produce films at a relatively cheap budget of below MYR 1 million (approximately USD 200,000 – 300,000). It's not a micro budget,

**Amir Muhammad**

it's just a low budget film. A micro budget would be considered to be less than MYR 100,000. Films that are under MYR 1 million can be considered to be low budget movies with good production values. Most important is quality control, and it should be at least at a broadcast level. Meanwhile, the risk is lower when you do not need a large team of people to work with and a large audience to earn back its budget. That's the benchmark we set for Kuman Pictures.

Focusing only on horror and thriller, it's a more focused direction for Kuman Pictures. We also work on the "royalty pay system", where every crewmember gets paid royalties, at least at the super telemovie rate. Each of them have a certain percentage, and we pay royalties every year. Even for movies that don't turn a profit, we still pay them a certain amount of money. This is something I took from the book publishing industry, because writers are not paid upfront, but they will receive certain royalty fees for every book that is sold.

We are the only company that has adopted this system, and nobody else handles royalties well. We have been doing this for three years. I still remember the first time we paid a royalty to a film crewmember, he called back and asked, "Did you actually put money into my account?" I answered, "Yes, it's in the contract."

**Joey Lee**

*What are the responses to the royalty system so far?*

**Amir Muhammad**

Well, it's not a lot of money, and of course it's not as high as the salary they deserve. It's based off of sales revenue. My dream is to pay royalty fees that add up to more than the salary. But to achieve this, we'd need to earn 50 million in sales, or at least 20 million, perhaps. However, it's literally better than nothing because they have a stake in it. If the films do well, they will receive more. If the films don't perform that well, they get less. But most importantly, they are committed to the film and have a sense of ownership in it.

**Joey Lee**

*How long are the royalty payments made?*

**Amir Muhammad**

Five years. Based on our experience, films usually sell well for the first three years. You won't make much more money after those three years and after the film is sold to different platforms. I find there isn't much for sales after five years, except for library sales, where you sell the films in a bundle. This is also a model used in Hollywood, because the royalty system is written into the law. Independent movies like Roger Corman used to do use this royalty system, for seven years perhaps.

**Joey Lee**

*Can you share about your distribution channels?*

**Amir Muhammad**

We have completed four movies so far. Each of them have gone out on different distribution channels. The initial idea was that all of them would go into cinemas, and then be distributed on other platforms. But due to COVID, we only managed to theatrically release two films. The first was *Two Sisters*. It was a flop in the cinema, but we were surprised to get a better price offered from Astro (Malaysian pay TV).

Our second film *Roh* was released during the semi-lockdown period. We were fortunate to get it released not just in Malaysia, but also Singapore, Brunei and Cambodia. Because

**Amir Muhammad**

there wasn't much content being shown during the pandemic, we were lucky not to have any tough competitors or blockbusters like Spider-Man in theaters. We then sold it to Netflix and Disney+ simultaneously, but the payment rate was not high because it wasn't exclusive rights. We sold to a North American distributor at a higher rate because it included exclusive rights for that territory.

The third movie was *Irul*. My initial strategy was to focus only on two cinemas, but to let it screen for few months. Eventually, that didn't work out because the cinemas closed down during the COVID period. So we ended up selling to Astro First. We were surprised to find out that the film did really well with the Malay audience, more so than the Tamil audience group, and got strong reviews. Surprisingly it also got picked up by a North American distributor which specializes in farm footage, which I didn't even know the existence of. They will send us payment for every quarter. Thanks to the internet, they just searched around the world and then approached us, hoping to use the footage.

The fourth film is *Ceroboh*, and the initial idea was to release this in cinemas too. But since the cinemas were suffering and we had remaining payments to be made from the previous films, we decided to sell it straight to Netflix, with rights to four countries. Since its release date is 31 August, which is also our Malaysian Independence Day, we are planning a marketing campaign centered around this theme. Obviously, the movie is not about independence, it's about an invasion by aliens. But we will tie the idea of winning freedom from aliens into the marketing strategy.

The fifth film is in Mandarin, a comedy-horror called *Die Die Top Student*, which was commissioned by Media Prima from a FINAS OTT grant. This is the first time we have shot with a grant. All the other projects were self-funded. The deal is that Media Prima owns broadcast rights for one year in Malaysia, and after that we can sell the film anywhere. I think this is a good model, because it's not fair for them to own the work forever. At the same time, it encourages us to sell it. If the movie is good, you should be able to sell it in many other countries.

The sixth film, *Pendatang*, is the most exciting one, and we want to make this film through crowdfunding. Because of the subject matter, it probably won't be able to get a pass-through normal release and distribution platform. We want to keep true to the spirit of the film. We will encourage people to back us, and in return the movie will be released for free. It will be put online for no charge, and we will not make any profit. We plan to launch the campaign in May. So the idea is, no matter how much we get, we will shoot it. So even if we only get RM 100k, we will still shoot it and make it happen.

In a way, I hope this is the future because we can't be relying on the same government grants, it's sad. We also can't rely on big companies which have a certain fixed idea of what will sell and what will not. And it's too competitive to apply for foreign grants, fighting against filmmakers from around the world, who may have better portfolios and be from better schools. The idea of crowdfunding is good, where it gives back to the crowd of people who supported the film, providing them what they want to watch. Personally, I think crowdfunding should not be for profit, and it should be released for free with sufficient funds backed for the project.

Joey Lee

*What do you most enjoy about producing?*

**Amir Muhammad**

What's interesting for me is that the script is never the final product. Things change on set. Sometime things change by accident. For example, an American director may need a storyboard for every single shot before the production. But I do not have that luxury. We do not have that kind of budget and time, because it's so time-consuming and it requires so much budget, technical expertise and location scouting in advance. I can never do that; and I will never do that.

For example, we may get access to a location for only one or two weeks because some locations decided not to let us do the shooting. So, you are always in a position where you need to "make do". I never have the chance to take a full year to write a script, or take another year to plan out the shots or rehearse. So you "make do" with what you have. I know a lot of great movies in the world are made in a way that doesn't look very organized. And the end product is good. You just need to hold on to it.

It's a kind of guerilla style. Our mentor is Roger Corman. When he found a set that was going to be torn down, he would just shoot there, so that the film looked like it had expensive production values, but he didn't need to pay. Or it so happens that an actor is free for two days, and so you immediately write a role for him or her to appear in. I think that's the joy of being a producer.

Joey Lee

*What goes into your selection of story and director?*

**Amir Muhammad**

It must be a good story and achievable within the budget. We have a script competition. Some have a good story, but the budget is too high. Others require a minimal budget, but it's so boring. It's hard to find a project that can do well on both scores, and at the same time, it needs to have cinematic style. Even the word cinematic is subjective. A good story is engaging, suspenseful, relatable.

The selection of a director is maybe more subjective. Normally for a director whom I can hang out with, I think I can probably work with them. Of course, it will also depend on their previous work and how well they can work with others, too. It's very important to be able to work with others. It's not just what they want to do, it depends on how they can communicate with others. We give a lot of chances to first time directors as well.

Joey Lee

*Usually, what would be your main target audience and target market?*

**Amir Muhammad**

There is no specific target, the only target should be viewers who like your movie. We can't be that specific in terms of age and demographic, really! In general, the target should be viewers who love the horror and thriller genres because they have certain expectations and references for it. Regarding the nationality, local factors will be important. It can't really have a very limited target market or age group, or I don't think it will work.

Joey Lee

*In general, how do you think Malaysians respond to our own Malaysian films?*

**Amir Muhammad**

In general, I don't think that Malaysians will watch a movie just because it's made in

**Amir Muhammad**

Malaysia. The Netflix algorithm also said so, because Malaysian films generally attract a lower interest. The amount that is paid for Malaysian movies is significantly lower too. I think they will support a movie if it's in line with what they are interested in, in terms of styles and genre. They are maybe some audiences who will watch "Malaysian" movies out of curiosity. But to be honest, it will be very small group, and maybe film festival audiences only.

Joey Lee

*How do you think we can make a good "Malaysian movie"?*

**Amir Muhammad**

I think it's a question of winning trust from the audience. One thing for sure is you should not blame the audience, because I think it is childish to say, "Oh, people don't watch my movie." You cannot scold the audience for not liking your film because it's their choice, their money and they spent the time to watch it. They have the right to be critical. To be honest, I don't know. If I knew how to make a good "Malaysian" film, I would make a great hit movie for sure. I learn more about this each time, and I am still learning.

Recently, as a jury member at a film festival, I got to watch some films which are not what I usually watch. I can say that I learn something every time I watch a new film. Even it's something I don't practice myself, or I don't know how to put into practice yet.

For example, there was an Iranian horror movie, and the whole movie is just about a jar, you never see any ghost. In this jar there is a spirit, and something will happen if you open it. So, the whole movie is literally about the jar, just make sure you do not open it, or break it. It's just so clever and at the same time, it has good production values. It can be kept so minimal, so simple! It's just an empty jar, so you don't need a huge budget. What a brilliant concept!

Joey Lee

*In terms of budgeting, what advice do have for others?*

**Amir Muhammad**

The most expensive cost is logistics. If you have five locations, it's costly. If you can reduce it from five locations to two, it will save you a lot in terms of transportation, the art department and time.

The other big expense is VFX, which can be very high. Ideally, using few locations and less VFX, or even no VFX is the best. Another expense is the size of the cast. We use a very minimum cast for our stories. Also, using existing clothes and props can save you a lot. On some occasions, we may use sound to create a scene in order to cut costs, instead of showing things in the scene.

Joey Lee

*In situations when you have no budget, which production lines expenses will you first compromise on, or give up?*

**Amir Muhammad**

To be honest, I do not want to do a super micro budget film. At the very least, it should be done at Malaysia telemovie rate MYR 70,000 (USD 16,500) and telemovie standard. I will not go below that budget, because it would be depending too much on favors and the crews will not be able to do well on the job.

You should not compromise in catering for sure. Because the crews should eat well, and

**Amir Muhammad** we never have a catering problem. If possible, we should shoot at a single place where everybody can stay and shoot, or we make the film without much travelling. If people move around, it costs time and money.

**Joey Lee** *Ideally, what kind of marketing and promotional campaign suits you best? Both locally and internationally.*

**Amir Muhammad** I think the marketing and promotional strategy should start before the production. It's nice if more people can watch your film, and at least they can discuss and talk about your movie. In Malaysia, some movies are released in a way that I doubt the intention of their release. Are you so embarrassed of your own movie?

Some films are being released on Astro First, or even worse, they are only being released in the cinema, which makes me suspect the possibility of money laundering. Maybe they already earned their money that way. So in a way, it's bad for the industry. The more movies like this, the less trust the audience will have in you, and then investors will be afraid. It's really a bad idea for our industry.

Ideally, the marketing plan should be built from the start. But the exact plan maybe will be done after the movie is complete. Ideally you should have a plan earlier on. Hiring a good designer is important, in my opinion. A trailer is also another key element. We find that it's better that the trailer be done by people who are not involved with the film, and it should not be done by the director. We realize that many directors tend to hide spoilers, but people nowadays just give the spoilers away. So don't be scared about spoilers. This is an important part of trust; you should get others to do it. Even the synopsis should be written by another professional.

Marketing is very important, and it's often overlooked. Making a movie is one thing, selling a movie is something else. I can say that the effort should be 50-50. Getting people to watch it is half of the battle. Unfortunately, I think we do not devote enough resources to the marketing plan. For animation, the marketing is done much better than other kinds of film. Even if a movie is released through Netflix, it should still be well promoted, although you need to get their approval for the campaign. You make the movie, and of course, you want people to watch your films.

**Joey Lee** *What are some ways that you think we can improve our Malaysian film industry?*

**Amir Muhammad** To destroy it and re-build it again. In this way, we can really get the right people to rebuild the entire film industry of Malaysia. Things just need to collapse and come back again. Maybe we should not have movies for a few years. Maybe filmmakers should just do something else, selling Malaysia's famous cuisine Bak Kut Teh and then we can rebuild the entire film industry again. Sometimes it's hard for people to let go when people think about their legacy.

Well, it's a borderless world now. You make a movie and you can sell to others. Unless you want to make a movie only for Najib propaganda. I think you can sell well outside the country with a movie that has good production values. Now possibilities are everywhere, and it's not just film anymore. It's about IP, characters and even songs.

**Amir Muhammad** That's a capitalistic mindset.

In terms of the cultural perspective, we get so many Spanish reviews for our films. We were surprised during the release of *Roh* to find so many Spanish reviews. How did they get the film? Probably it was watched by a blogger, and then it was shared virally. So it's really borderless now.

**Joey Lee** *In what way you think FINAS and Malaysia in general can learn from the development of Korean cinema?*

**Amir Muhammad** A screen quota will work only if there is no corruption. But we are living in Malaysia, you knew the terrible condition of corruption here. For example, for "wajib tayang" or compulsory screening, you cannot legally screen your own movies consecutively. But some people just set up another company to get around this. So, this sort of quota system does not work in Malaysia. In a way, it is a Malaysian success story because we will always find a way to do something "creative" and work things out the way we want. I am always in doubt when government policies try to restrict things, because it often serves no use or purpose.

What happened in Korea is good, for example exhibitors are investing in production. For example, CJ Entertainment. In Malaysia, GSC [the cinema operator] has announced its plan to invest in a slate of productions. So, it's a good trend. Because if we have the quota in order to show people local films, why not make good ones. On the one hand, it seems like a monopoly; but on the other hand, it ensures a certain quality in terms of production values. Imagine if TGV (the cinema operator) also wanted to invest in production. Competition is always a good way to improve the industry. But the biggest problem is that the audience is not there.

**Joey Lee** *Regarding Malaysia's campaign "Road to Oscar", how far you think we are from that now?*

**Amir Muhammad** It's odd because we are the only country with such a campaign "Road to Oscar." I am not sure if there is anybody who is hoping to get money from that project. It's more significant when you get 10 Thai people to watch your film. Why is our culture always focused on such things?

It's good that nobody knows how to solve that problem yet. It means that humans are unpredictable! For example, Amir Khan has become a very famous star in China. How could we imagine that? Occasionally, unusual things happen in the film industry. Eventually one day, we may have a Malaysian blockbuster, or maybe not during my lifetime. Maybe the director will be someone who has never received a FINAS grant, or someone who has never written a Facebook post to help the Malaysian film industry, or maybe just someone from the community. It's something we should be really proud of if it happens.

**Joey Lee** *Your film Roh was selected to represent Malaysia in the Best International Feature category at the Oscars. What's your take on that?*

**Amir Muhammad** It was a surprise and a nice bonus. It also gave us a lesson in terms of deliverables, such

**Amir Muhammad** as the scale, cm by cm, the physical DVD which we Fedexed to them, and so on. We had zero marketing budget, so we couldn't organize a campaign to get people to watch it. But it opened a door for sales agents to get to know about *Roh*, and we managed to distribute it in North America because of this, too.

**Joey Lee** *In terms of the changing tastes of the audience and new media platforms, how do you cope with such changes?*

**Amir Muhammad** It's a good trend, as there are now more platforms for the audience to choose from. If there are only a limited number of platforms, they become too powerful. You don't want one particular platform to have too much power over the others. One of the most successful stories is *Mytote*, filmed by the YouTuber Kelantan. It has no movie stars, but it became the highest grossing film on Astro First because it wasn't in cinemas, and so we had to watch it on Astro First. It's a great success story because they were not backed by any major company or cast, but they managed to get the audience to like it!

If you target something at a specific audience, you can represent them well. That's why it's good to make films in regions like Sabah or Sarawak, to give more diversity to storytelling in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a diverse country, but our movies are not. For example, how many movies are made in the Hokkien dialect, or set in other regions in Malaysia? We rarely come across something that's so specific, but it can be relatable. The potential is always there, especially with these different platforms. I think Astro First is a good platform for those who don't have cinemas in their neighborhood, or who don't want to go to the cinema because they have kids, or maybe the cinema is too far for them. But it is also a shame that there are too many movies being just dumped there with nobody to watch them. Apparently, they have not reached the numbers that they targeted two years ago. A platform can lose the audience's trust in this way.

**Joey Lee** *Lastly, what's your advice for up-and-coming producers or filmmakers?*

**Amir Muhammad** The only way to learn filmmaking is to do it. Once you are there on set, if something doesn't work, then you must figure out how to fix it and sort it out. People should just make whatever they want to make, and I believe in making interesting mistakes. You are going to make mistakes anyway, so make sure that it's an interesting mistake!

- April 14, 2022

**by Lee Choi Kin (joey@passionateworld.com)** is a producer and founder of Passionate World, an independent film production company. With the vision "Be Human, Be Passion", Joey Lee believes that films can create a better future. She is a committee member of CFAM, and a Busan Asian Film School 2022 fellow. Several short films she produced have been selected by KL Eco Film Fest and BMW Shorties. She is the executive producer of *Kelinguh* which was selected for SeaShorts 2020. Recently, she has completed an indigenous short animation of a vanquishing tradition *Borih* and is producing a feature film *Jaut's Mission* which was selected for Busan's Asian Project Market in 2021.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# BAT-AMGALAN LKHAGVAJAV

Producer / Director  
Mongolia

Interview by Tsengel Davaasambuu

Bat-Amgalan Lkhagvajav is a Mongolian producer-director who grew up in Ulaanbaatar. In 2012, he founded his production company Media Crackers. His short films were screened at several international film festivals and won awards. His first feature film *They Sing Up on the Hill* premiered at 2018 Busan International Film Festival. He is an alumnus of Berlinale Talents and the Asian Film Academy.

Tsengel  
Davaasambuu

*Good day to you. Thank you for accepting my request for the interview. I'd like to start by asking about the state of cinema in the Mongolian culture industry. Where do you think Mongolian cinema and arts and culture stand at this point?*

Bat-Amgalan  
Lkhagvajav

Good day to you. I hope my interview can be helpful. I was happy to accept this invitation because I am an alumnus of the Asian Film Academy. For the culture and arts point of view it is a wide-ranging question. But to speak specifically of cinema, it is still developing. As you know the world cinema standard outside of Mongolia is very high, and when we were in the Communist era, Mongolian cinema could stand on the world stage. After 1990 democracy came, but all those industries that had been supported by government collapsed, and at that point Mongolian cinema began to sink as well. Mongolian cinema came to be in the hands of independent filmmakers. Now, 30 years later, the situation is finally starting to improve and the government is taking notice. So just recently we have signed and confirmed a new Mongolian film law [Law on the Promotion of Cinematography and Film Production, 2021].

Tsengel  
Davaasambuu

*Yes indeed. We were like an orphan as an industry. Except for some commercial cinema owners, we had no one to take care of us.*

Bat-Amgalan  
Lkhagvajav

I think this new law is quite similar to the film laws in place in developed countries. It seems that a lot of research went into it, and they did a good job in drawing up the regulations and laws. So I think it's really good for filmmakers in Mongolia.

Tsengel  
Davaasambuu

*So you think this will mark a new path and development era for Mongolian filmmakers?*

Bat-Amgalan  
Lkhagvajav

Yes, of course. I work with international filmmakers quite often, but they only come to Mongolia for small production jobs, like TV documentaries and some smaller scale films. Up until now, large productions from Hollywood or other countries have never come, because we haven't had the laws and regulations in place to support that.

Tsengel  
Davaasambuu

*Common standards.*

Bat-Amgalan  
Lkhagvajav

That's right. And that's why they haven't come. But now this time we have settled those issues, and so it's like we are opening the door to international filmmakers. It can be quite helpful because when they come, Mongolian filmmakers will get the opportunity to work with them, and they will get a good salary but also gain good experience and practice. They can learn a lot from international filmmakers.

Tsengel  
Davaasambuu

*I see. On the human resource side, do you think that artists and filmmakers have a certain lack of knowledge when it comes to working on the international stage? What do you think?*

Bat-Amgalan  
Lkhagvajav

This is also an issue that we face, especially for the new young generation of filmmakers. There are only two film schools in Mongolia, and the standards are not so high, so this has been a repeated issue for us. That's why those people who could do it say they don't have the ability to work at an international level. But English language is not problem for the young filmmakers.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**  
**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

*What about those filmmakers with more developed careers?*

Yes, as for me, I've been lucky. I've been able to work with international filmmakers because I have a history that I have built up over my career. Then somehow they find me, and I work with them. I do hope that the new law can help other filmmakers. For our older filmmakers English is a big problem though, I am sure.

The government has some budget that they spend on programs and education. We need to rise our standards and the quality of our films. But there's always some difference between the way things can be, and the way things are. It depends on the person who's studying the subject, of course, and then the government and ministry have to play their part. The Minister of Culture is the foundation for all of these efforts. The goal is for people to study, and then make their own films, go to festivals, connect with people, and get to know each other. That's the best way.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*What kind of international cooperation and activities will be supported by funds from the new law? When this interview is released, I think people in other countries may be wondering how to reach out and get this information. Can you give us some guidance, please?*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

Soon there will be a website in English that provides various kinds of information. So foreign filmmakers can consult this if, for example, someone wants to find a co-producer. But the Ministry of Culture is collecting information and preparing that at the moment, so maybe soon it will be available.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*Right now the Minister of Culture is a female politician, and she had a TV station and some years of experience in the industry. What do you think about the work she's doing and her communication level? Is she open to any collaborations? I'm just curious about your personal view.*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

I'm so happy about her being Minister of Culture because she used to work in the television industry, which is similar to the cinema business, and she knows the industry. So it's been a great advantage to have her as Minister of Culture, particularly in this era with the drafting of the film law. I think she has done a really good job. Well, both for international filmmakers and for Mongolian filmmakers, this law is a win-win.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*What year did you attend the Asian Film Academy?*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

2009.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*2009. So when you applied for it, how was it an investment in your future, and would you recommend such programs to others?*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

I always recommend it to people. If someone comes to me, asking me what to do in terms of studies, I tell them to try applying. Because for me, it was my school.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**  
**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

*It's a gateway to the industry, I'd say.*

It's true that it's a gateway. Because my major was engineering, and I had never been to film school. This was my first school for filmmaking. That's why I'm so grateful. It was short term and fast but it was well run and I learned a lot.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**  
**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

*So afterwards, were your short films selected in Busan International Film Festival?*

My short film *The Good Old Days* was in the short film competition section at Busan. That was in 2013. And then my feature film, *They Sing up on the Hill*, had its world premiere there in 2019.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*I see. Did you manage to find a sales agent for *They Sing up on the Hill*, or was there anyone able to distribute your film internationally?*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

I found a sales agent from Sam and Su. He worked on the film for two or three years, but he hasn't been able to sell it yet. We sold it domestically, but not yet internationally.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**  
**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

*So to wrap up, is there anything you want to tell the readers of this interview?*

If anybody wants to make a film in Mongolia, you are very welcome. Now is a good time to come. This pandemic is finally over, we've got a new film law, and everything is so new. If you want to be a part of it, I'm happy to work with you. We have a lot of filmmakers here.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*How many professional film producers and directors would you say are working in the Mongolian industry nowadays?*

**Bat-Amgalan**  
**Lkhagvajav**

I would say maybe 15 or 20. They are more and more active these days. Maybe ten of them are female.

**Tsengel**  
**Davaasambuu**

*Thanks a lot for this interview.*

*- April 22, 2022*

**by** **Tsengel Davaasambuu, Ph.D. (culturedistributor@gmail.com)** is film producer and distributor from Mongolia, and the founder of Culture Distributor, LLC (www.culturedistributor.org). She is a staunch promoter of Mongolian films to international market and festivals. She feels a sense of affinity with Asian film industry trends, as she is committed to continue supporting and advocating Mongolian cinema to the local and global public. She studied in USA and South Korea, and currently lectures in the School of Culture at University of Arts and Culture. Tsengel has been a member of NETPAC since 2015, and worked as a jury member for several film festivals. She was also involved in the Cannes Producers Network program in 2017. Recently, she worked on the *Children of Genghis*, *White Blessing* and *Big Heads* children's series. *Wrestling Princess* participated in the Berlin European Film Market and found a sales agent there. The film *Big Games*, in *Search of Three Treasures* also participated in the Cannes Marche du film in 2022.



# GRACE SWE ZIN HTAIK

Director / Producer / Actor

Myanmar

Interview by Sic Hmuu Naing

Grace Swe Zin Htaik proudly says that she is an actress by profession, a social activist by choice, and a media personality by chance.

Grace graduated from the Rangoon Institute of Economics in 1977 with a degree in commerce. She continued to study for Diploma Accountancy, Registered Law and a diploma in French from Alliance Francaise/ Yangon in 1989. In 2002, she won a media fellowship to participate in the MediaLeadership program, jointly designed by Population Services International/NYC and University of Southern California/LA, USA. She obtained a Supreme Diploma from the International Institute of Abhidhamma/Yangon in 2008.

Grace was actively involved in the creative content industry in Myanmar from 1971 to 1991, making over 200 films as an actress. Since the early 1990s, she has worked as a producer and director on over 100 local digital movies. Since 2000, her company CG has provided coordination for filming international content in Myanmar.

Grace was one of the pioneers in conducting various mass media campaigns on social issues like HIV, TB, hygiene, human trafficking, IP, etc. by acting as a liaison between the local government, departments, corporations and management teams to pursue, formulate and explore various projects.

In 1977, Grace won the national Academy Award for best performance. In 2002, she won the PSA Award at the Summer School Workshop at the University of Southern California in LA. In 2007, she was named an Ambassador for Peace by the Universal Peace Federation in New York. In 2013, she was awarded as an “Outstanding Person” for her lifelong contributions to the community by the Burmese Youth Association in San Francisco. In April 2014, she was awarded as Person of the Year at WIPO Day 2014 by EU Myanmar Center & ACE Law Firm for her dedication regarding intellectual property issues in Myanmar over the past three decades.

Since May 2015, she has been a patron of the Memory Film Festival with the International Festival Director Team, local authorities, the Ministry of Information and the film community. In 2015, she was awarded the Best Mentor Award by Singapore Myanmar Film Festival. In 2017, she was bestowed as a Knight of the Order of Culture & Letters by the French government.

Regarding the creative industry, Grace is currently serving as Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Film in the National University of Art & Culture; a member of the Myanmar Censor Board; a member of the Steering Committee at the Film Development Center; and Managing Director of CSG Co. Ltd.

Regarding public service, she is currently serving as Country Director of Myanmar Mobile Education Project; President of UPF/Myanmar, President of Myanmar US Friendship Association and Vice President of Myanmar Intellectual Property Proprietor's Association (MIPPA)

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*First, can you tell me about your experiences in the film industry?*

**Grace Swe Zin Htaik**

From 1966 to 1970, I attended talent training at Sumawa Production House, focusing on method acting. I made my feature film debut with *Say Lo Yar Say* in 1970. 95% of my films were in black and white, and 5% were color films. In the 1970s, I got awarded by the academy, and later my husband started the production company Sein Kabar Film. It was then that I started as a producer. My husband and I ran a production service as a family business.

In the 1990s, a project was released about the iodized Salt campaign. I set up the production and reached out to the public. Then later I made several public service videos on life skills and clean production. Instead of showing them in theaters, I played the role of an actress in a video production film. I also provided production services for international content. Finally, I have experience working as a unit director on a feature film *Metta* which was produced by Mandalay Production House and Yangon Production House.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*How has the film industry changed over the years?*

**Grace Swe Zin Htaik**

Burmese cinema has been around for 100 years. During the first 25 years, we were under the British administration. For the next 25 years we followed the socialist system. So the film industry has always been close to the government. In the most recent 25 years we have worked within the military system, and they want to develop the film market as an open market. So we often made films about the military. If we want to produce films, we should make a film which concerns the military.

Under the socialist system, Burmese cinema's slogans “Film is film” and “Film is for the people” became controversial, and after the controversy, the government allowed films to be made only under the authority of the government. Later, the system changed again. The government treated cinema as an open market economy, and as a result, the quality decreased and the quantity increased.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*What are the advantages and disadvantage of such a change?*

**Grace Swe Zin Htaik**

This change made it easier and faster to make movies. Now, between 80 and 100 films are released each year. These movies are primarily entertainment, and the most popular are comedy movies.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*Why do you think that so many comedy movies have been produced?*

**Grace Swe Zin Htaik**

The reason for this is that many film actors have originally come from the stage. On the stage, the actors have to overact so that the audience can hear the jokes and see them from the back of the theater. These habits which have been developed on stage are then brought to the cinema. This is the primary reason for the overacting which we often see in feature films, and gradually the audience has become accustomed to it. Only these kind of films that are popular with the audience are coming out, and now there are no films in other genres being produced anymore.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*Based on your experience, what do you recommend in order to improve*

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*the film industry in Myanmar?*

**Grace Swe Zin**  
**Htaik**

I strongly believe that the following points are really crucial for improving our industry. These elements are talent management, film policy, investment, human resources, insurance and social security, and then to develop the film market. However unfortunately, there is currently no one who is committed to developing these areas of need. Moreover, there is no plan in place regarding film screening and exhibition. Except for the private sector, there are no laws in place to support the industry, and no grants available.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*Regarding revenues from film screenings, how does the local market work?*

**Grace Swe Zin**  
**Htaik**

Regarding the local film market, there is a domestic box office system which is posted each week. In terms of percentages, in week one the theater owner takes 60% of revenues and the producer will take 40%. In week two, the split changes to 50% for the theater owner and 50% for the producer. From week 3 or later, the producer will take a higher share than the cinema owner .

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*What do you think the film industry in Myanmar needs in order to go international?*

**Grace Swe Zin**  
**Htaik**

There must be a Myanmar film development strategy. At the moment, there is none. Since I am a faculty member, I want to go and push for film policy and taxes. But without a film development strategy, independent filmmakers for example have to rely on international sources of funding because there is none in Myanmar.

Yangon Film School is a private film school located in Myanmar. So YFS students are producing a variety of works from documentaries to short films. Every year, some of their films are selected to compete in international film festivals. Then there are filmmakers who attended film school abroad and returned to work in the mainstream industry. Nonetheless there are some differences of opinion between film directors about the best way to move forward. If Myanmar can send filmmakers to global film labs, I think it can help our film industry to develop.

**Sic Hmuu Naing**

*What do you think is the most important factor in the future success of the film industry?*

**Grace Swe Zin**  
**Htaik**

I think storytelling techniques will be the most important. In Myanmar, we need to set up stories based on unique settings and locations, even if our filmmaking technology lags behind. If we know how to present the story in a way that will capture attention, we will be able to reach the international market.

- 5 April, 2022

by **Sic Hmuu Naing (aungshinthant97@gmail.com)** is a vlogger, content creator, producer and owner of Toly Moly Production company in Yangon, Myanmar.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# WUNNA KYAW

Commercial Filmmaker / Executive Producer

Sony Alpha Brand Ambassador

Myanmar

Interview by Mai May Sakar Wah

Wunna Kyaw is a well-known commercial filmmaker and an executive producer for corporate communications. He is also a speaker and lecturer at government and private institutes. From start to finish, he presents his years of experience and knowledge in commercial filmmaking, consumer behaviour, and creative management subjects, including videography and post-production workflow. He has worked with reputable global agencies including BBC, CAN, AFP, Asia INC Forums, World Vision, Save the Children, Goethe Institute, and UNESCAP among others. He helps industry-leading associations and new filmmakers shape their prospective goals.

Wunna is also a book writer, song composer, cyclist, and bass player. He manages his own production house called Miracle Post Media Production, a cyclo-tourism business called Nature Ride Myanmar, and a marketing and public relation services company called Hop Agency Myanmar. Since 2015, Wunna has served as a Sony Alpha brand ambassador in Myanmar for the video category.

Mai May Sakar

Wah

Wunna Kyaw

*How did you start in the industry?*

I studied at the Institute of Marine Technology. At that time, the college was celebrating its 25th anniversary. Since I was interested in art, I was assigned to create a tribute song and film in honor of the anniversary. So I worked as a scriptwriter, director and actor in that film. For the editing, a senior in our college came to teach me how to edit with Adobe Premiere (1st version). In this way, I learned how to use Adobe Premiere editing and Adobe After Effects.

I resigned after three years as a naval officer. Then the CEO of Forever Media Group asked me to work at his media group. So I worked in its post-production department for three years, from 1999 to 2002. Later, I quit and started “Hepta Digital Art” company, with four other friends. In 2005, we closed the business and I started Wunna Kyaw Media Production independently. I started as an editor, but later I also directed short commercials and corporate films. In 2007, I closed all of my businesses and went to Singapore. I worked there as a senior editor for two years, and then I came back to Myanmar and started the Miracle Post production house.

Mai May Sakar

Wah

Wunna Kyaw

*What kind of difficulties did you have when you started the Miracle Post production house?*

There were two main difficulties when I started. First, I was good at working in this field and had a market and loyal customers. But I had a lot of financial difficulties. For many years I had to take out loans to run the company. Another difficulty was that I knew nothing about management at the time. So I couldn't handle my employees well and faced many losses.

As I said earlier, when I first started the Miracle Post production house, I couldn't afford the rent for the office by myself. That's why I rented it together with my friends from the advertising agency. A year later, three other friends put their shares into the production house and we moved into a condominium. The company grew fast there. After that, my other two friends and I expanded Miracle Post Production into a limited company called “Kyaw Aaron”. We made corporate films, and we also made a feature film, but we haven't been able to release it at the theatre yet, because of COVID. Now we have temporarily dissolved the company. I continue to run Miracle Post production as an independent professional freelancer.

Mai May Sakar

Wah

Wunna Kyaw

*How was your life before and after COVID and the coup?*

Before COVID-19, there were many opportunities and I also had to go on overseas study tours, as I am a brand ambassador for SONY Alpha. We had technical cooperation and film competitions. But after COVID-19, we could no longer film outdoors. As a commercial director, I had a lot of projects I could do from home, like editing and post-production. After the political situation changed, some of my business units halted.

Mai May Sakar

Wah

*Nowadays, most people in Myanmar watch movies on the internet or OTT platforms. Please tell me what you think of that.*

## Wunna Kyaw

There is a lot of media coverage about piracy in Myanmar, but we don't have an effective law to stop this from happening. People in this industry have been trying for years and still can't make it work. So piracy is very terrible. People pirate foreign films, embed them with Burmese subtitles and post them online. On some channels, there are foreign films which are premiered but which do not bring any profit to the foreign producers. So there are a lot of foreign movies and TV series available. Myanmar people watch them all the time and they are used to it. As for local films, if they see them on social media, they will watch those films. But they won't pay for them. So the culture of paying for movies on OTT platforms hasn't caught on yet.

At present, local movies can't premiere on international OTT platforms such as Netflix or Disney Plus, and there are many difficulties. If we release a movie on our local OTT platform, the profit is much lower than for movies released in theatres. So, local OTT platforms don't put much money into production. When they make their movies, they have to think about revenue and profits. So they can't afford to spend as much of a budget as they do making movies for the theatre.

On this subject, I would like to talk a bit about online movies. Nowadays, people enjoy entertainment and knowledge sharing on the internet. As a result, the number of people watching movies online will continue to grow. But due to the sudden high rate of internet data, the number of online viewers in Myanmar has decreased. So some people only watch short clips rather than feature-length movies. Some people are starting to watch on free offline channels. Then some businesses sell memory sticks that hold a lot of movies. Some people pay \$5 or more to create online accounts and watch from the cloud. But it's illegal. It's a total copyright violation.

## Mai May Sakar Wah

*In light of this, how will this affect producers and filmmakers?*

## Wunna Kyaw

As for producers, they will act like producers. For example, they will survey the market first, and if they see a profit, they will produce their projects. For now, they will only create content that appeals to advertisers, like comedy skits. Facebook is popular in Myanmar, so they will create a page for their media platform and post their projects on it. People won't pay to watch their projects, but they can make money through advertisements if they have a large number of viewers and engagements.

So there will be more producers creating contemporary content, but fewer producers making feature films. As for some well-known filmmakers, they may be hired by local channels to make miniseries. But those filmmakers need to have a strong team and have to work hard. They must also be experienced and have the trust of investors. So, not every filmmaker can be hired. At present, young filmmakers have little chance if they only want to make a real feature film, rather than a commercial one. The same goes for professional producers. They have only a 1 per cent chance of producing feature films for theatrical release.

## Mai May Sakar Wah

*Now the government has reopened cinemas. How is the people's reaction and the situation of the cinemas?*

## Wunna Kyaw

Whether theatres can be run as usual depends entirely on political stability. Now, the government has reopened cinemas, but very limited quantity of the audience is going to the movies. People don't go there, not only because they're afraid of COVID, but also they're afraid of crowded places. So the cinema business is dependent on the state of the country.

Therefore movies that are premiering in theatres now face a lot of losses. I heard from a producer of a movie that is currently in theatres that they couldn't even recoup the cost of making a print. When the movie is shown nationwide, they have to make a print, which costs \$2,000. Now they can't even get back \$2,000. If that is the case, all the film production companies that are currently premiering movies in theatres will face losses. If so, no one will make movies for theatres. If the country's politics, people's security and economic situation do not improve, the business of cinema and the culture of people going to the cinema will fall down at the near future.

## Mai May Sakar Wah Wunna Kyaw

*What is the difference between local and international producers?*

In Myanmar, the role of the producer was not very well-known in the film industry 4 or 5 years ago. There were very few professional producers. Some took the role seriously, either. Myanmar's film production had operated for years without professional producers. There were only executive producers and shooting managers in the film industry. Only TV channels had their producers and hired professionals for the producer roles. In the Myanmar film industry, the role of the producer is too weak. This is the difference between local and international producers. But recently, the role of local producers has become better known.

Internationally, the role of a producer is equivalent to that of a director, and not everyone can be a producer. They must know all the details of the production process and must have a passion for management. In my opinion, a professional producer must reach a certain stage in his or her life to support talents until their project is made into a film. Moreover, he or she also must be willing to contribute to the industry. I think *Aunt Grace*<sup>1</sup> and *Ko Min Htin*<sup>2</sup> are the kinds of producers who have reached a certain stage and are willing to help young filmmakers. They found film schools for young filmmakers to try to bring Burmese cinema to a higher level. We also need producers with global experience. To have such professional producers with global experience, our film industry and the film market also need to keep working. If the industry is in a state of stagnation, it will slow down the emergence of professional producers in the country.

## Mai May Sakar Wah

*What sort of qualities should a producer have? How should she or he prepare to appeal to investors in Myanmar?*

<sup>1</sup> Aunt Grace (Shwe Zin Htike) is a member of the Myanmar Motion Pictures Organization, and she was a famous actress in 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Ko Min Htin (Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi) is a writer, poet, director and founder of Human Dignity Film Institute which mainly trains young documentary filmmakers.

## Wunna Kyaw

If a producer wants to get a job, he or she must have a good portfolio. They can start their careers as professional producers on small projects like MTV and online commercials. Then, after working on big projects like TV commercials and feature films, they'll have a good portfolio. To be a good producer, he or she must understand human resource management, finance, budgeting and local culture. They must know the characteristics of people and must be good at communication skills. It's not very easy, but in this way, he or she can get a good reputation.

As I said before, it's also important to have a strong portfolio and to work on various projects to gain investors' trust. Therefore portfolio creation is important. But in Myanmar, I haven't seen this kind of strong portfolio creation very much, and it still needs to improve. Just posting on Facebook doesn't give you a strong portfolio. We have to create strong portfolios that can be posted globally, like on IMDB, LinkedIn and Vimeo. So we should build a strong portfolio slowly. For newbies, start with a newbie portfolio and work to build a professional portfolio.

## Mai May Sakar

### Wah

## Wunna Kyaw

*Do you have any final comments?*

In light of the current political and economic situation, our country remains a pitiful little country compared to other countries. The film industry is at a standstill because of the country's slow development and political instability. In addition, the collaboration between people in this industry is important. It will not improve if people in the industry fight each other. I think we all need to help each other as brothers, sisters and colleagues.

*- May 20, 2022*

# 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Mai May Sakar Wah (maimaysakarwah@gmail.com)** is a filmmaker living in Yangon, Myanmar. She studied documentary filmmaking at Human Dignity Film Institute (HDFI), Myanmar in 2016 and participated in Film Leaders Incubator (FLY) filmmaking workshop which was held by Busan Film Commission in Indonesia in 2017. In 2022 she participated in International Film Business Academy Online Program of Busan Asian Film School. She is currently working as an independent filmmaker.



# MIN BAHADUR BHAM

Writer / Director / Producer

Nepal

Interview by Prem Prasad Adhikary

An award-winning filmmaker from Nepal, Min Bahadur Bham graduated in filmmaking and literature. He also has a masters degree in Buddhist Philosophy and Political Science. His short film *The Flute* (2012) was the first Nepalese film to be presented at the Venice Film Festival. He was a participant of the Berlinale Talent Campus 2013, Asian Film Academy 2013, and was awarded the Fellowship Fund.

His directorial debut *The Black Hen* (2015) is the first feature film from Nepal to be presented in Venice Critics Week, and it was awarded with Best Film. The film was a huge box office success in Nepal and it was also the official entry from Nepal to the Oscars for the Best Foreign Language Film category in 2016.

Prem Prasad  
Adhikary  
Min Bahadur  
Bham

*Can you please introduce yourself?*

I am Min Bahadur Bham, born and raised in Mugu District, in the Karnali region of Nepal. I came to Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal and joined the theatre. Later on, I enrolled at Oscar International College. After graduating from there, I made a short film called *The Flute*. Later on, I made my debut feature film, *The Black Hen*. Currently, I am working on my second feature film project, *A Year of Cold*.

Prem Prasad  
Adhikary  
Min Bahadur  
Bham

*What motivated you to join the theatre?*

It was a constructive choice on my part. When I came from Mugu to Kathmandu I knew that I ultimately wanted to make cinema, but during those days there was no access to any film school or film institutions. So I joined the theatre where I could study literature, develop a habit of writing, learn about set design, blocking, lights and sound. That way I could practice those things, but if I had focused on cinema at that time, I wouldn't have had access to all that.

In theatre, whether we're knowledgeable or not, we have to handle responsibilities of various departments that I wanted to learn and experience. Still today in Nepal, a person who works in theatre is called a theatre worker, and a person who works in cinema is called a maker. So I think my background in theatre helped me pave the path of my directorial journey.

Prem Prasad  
Adhikary  
Min Bahadur  
Bham

*Can you share about the festival journey of your short film, *The Flute*?*

The production of the short film took place at end of February. The deadline of Cannes was the 5th of March, so we were in too much of a rush to submit it. So we thought to apply for a festival that comes after Cannes. We submitted it to Venice, and it had its world premiere in 2012. It was the first short film from Nepal ever to premiere at Venice. At that time we only had knowledge about world premieres, and weren't aware of how premieres in other regions worked. I had a team, but they don't have a sound knowledge of it. Moreover, after film school we were all busy in developing our own projects. So after the world premiere, we didn't too think much about it. I missed many film festivals even though I had invitations from them.

Thinking about it today, the festival journey of my short film was quite limited after Venice, even though it could have reached more festivals. In Nepal we only screened at Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival and Ekadeshma International Short Film Festival, and no other film festivals in the South Asian region. Still at that time it was really a good chance to uplift my career as a filmmaker.

Prem Prasad  
Adhikary  
Min Bahadur  
Bham

*How important are short films for new and upcoming directors? What is their value?*

There is no doubt about their importance. Literally 'no doubt'. Aspiring filmmakers and student filmmakers have to make short films. There is no other way. Admittedly, this is not a hard and fast rule. Somebody can make a feature film directly. There isn't any policy or law about that. But this is the right way to enter into world cinema, especially if you are looking for funds, support, markets, labs. If you want to experience all these, making

**Min Bahadur Bham**

short films is the only way.

Not only that, I also believe that it is good to make short films. I myself would have made more short films if I had a good idea and story. I would have made it in the gap between feature films like now. Short films help to sharpen and groom us. They make us practical. What will happen if a driver doesn't drive a vehicle? It doesn't matter whether he drives on a highway, or simply drives from home to a temple. He must drive. Similarly, short films are not only for making or starting your career. For internal growth, practice and experimentation, one must make short films.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Can you tell us about the role of your producers in making your debut feature film, The Black Hen?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

I made my short film in 2012. In 2013, I spent time scriptwriting and travelling to AFA and Berlinale. Then we started the project from the beginning of 2014. Before making this movie, I approached Tsering Rhitar Sherpa to be my producer. For funding purposes, I needed a company.

At that time, there was no one in Nepal who wanted to make a career as a producer. The existing producers just invested money in the film, and had the mentality of being a producer. And up until now, the concept of producing remains the same as before. I did not really experience the role of a producer.

From Nepal, I had two producers, and I received moral support from both of them. But they were not available on set, they didn't have any idea about those things. I had a producer from abroad, too. When I was in Berlin in 2013 I met a German producer. I sent her the script after I returned to Nepal. Immediately, she applied to the World Cinema Fund and we got it. During the production of the movie, we got another French producer through the German producer, even though I had not meet her. When the fund was confirmed, we were doing a rough edit in Nepal. The French producer wanted to meet me, so we met each other in Nepal. It was mysterious and magical in my debut feature film.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*How was your experience of working with a sales agent for The Black Hen?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

My producer came onboard at the post production stage, so we did not have any time to find a sales agent. After we completed the film, we had its world premiere at Venice in 2015. I was approached by various sales agents after the premiere.

We learn from our mistakes. There was no one who guided me in my journey. I did not know about which agent is good or bad. I did not have a clear idea about sales agents, I was just learning. And I did not have time to connect to my foreign producer personally to discuss more about it. There are many opportunities that I missed due to my inadequate knowledge.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Did you you have a target audience for The Black Hen in Nepal?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

To be honest, I had no idea about my audience. I was not clever or knowledgeable at that time. After learning about film in college, I made a short film. Later on, I wanted to make a feature film. I made my debut feature in a short period of time. I was not in a state to think about who my audience will be.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*What marketing strategy did you design to make it commercially successful in Nepal, even though it was an independent arthouse film?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

It was a combination of my knowledge from theatre, my own strategy and my network. During the inception of the Gurukul theatre, they showed their dramas to children. After they become adults, the same audience came to watch drama at the theatre. So the Gurukul theatre has created its own market, and gained much attention these days.

As our film has a child protagonist, we mainly focused on schools and colleges. I learned from the Gurukul theatre that whether I have large audiences immediately or not, for me and for us, we are preparing them to be our future audiences.

The next benefit is that they will try to connect with contemporary experiments, technical changes, and storytelling. I tried to increase visual literacy among the audience. It was my pure strategy. If I make the children my first audience, then after they grow up, they will be my audience at 20-25 years. They will teach their kids, too.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*What can we do as filmmakers or producers to create our own audience? We need to increase the audience in Nepal. What role can the government play in this?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

I'll talk about the government's role in a moment. First of all, let me talk about the role of film professionals like us. Previously, I used to think that the film fraternity must be united and well-organized. Now, I don't say that exclusively. Movements, awareness and gatherings will not take us anywhere. Now, I prefer to focus on individual effort.

Focused individual effort will turn into collective effort. I like to name an anthropological term 'agent' here which means that all the individual efforts will turn into a collective effort. Especially in South Asia, we collect issues and try to be united, but the individual efforts are always missing.

The business side of art must be done in the collective sense, but the creation of art must be done at the individual level. Group scale will be seen as an effortless outcome. For example, now Abinash's film is in Cannes. Maybe in the future, Prem's film will be in Berlin, Pasang's in Venice. They will definitely find a market for their films. But if we had tried to find the market before the films, that would be futile. We would be deviating from our karma. The work of an artist is to do karma.

It's the government's responsibility to act as an agent to bring all the individual karmas into one place. The government has to collect Prem's voice, Abinash's success, Pasang's energy, my experience. It has to cash in on these different individual efforts. It's the responsibility of the government.

Now here is the problem; the one who must be responsible isn't doing that here in Nepal.

**Min Bahadur Bham**

It's artists like us, the ones who don't have to be responsible who are saying that we must be responsible. That's why our karma as artists has gone away. So we are busy making groups, organizations, uniting for collective work, sometimes forming the producers' union. That's not our job. That's what my experience has taught me. I'm not saying that forming unions and uniting is wrong. I'm not judging it as wrong or right.

But we artists need to do karma. Other agencies like the government need to join the dots. The government has to collect and patch up the recent success of Abinash, Pasang's enthusiastic thought and patience, Prem's expertise, Ram Bahadur's experience, and the dreams of youngsters. The government must bring them all in and join the dots. We as artists are doing that. We are doing the foolish work, and the government is doing nothing.

For example, in South Korea, the government worked at making policy. They prepared the quota system, supported local films, subsidized them, worked on taxation, etc. But filmmakers did not try to unite like us. Bong Joon Ho came up with his own style, Park Chan-wook came, Kim-Ki duk came on his own, Lee Chang-dong appeared. The collective voice of the individual voices shaped Korean cinema. But what if the four of them had not made films, and had instead formed unions, had formed groups and discussed what will be the future of Korean cinema, and had wasted time in debating, then their films would not exist. Then, how could Korean film exist? Korean cinema would not have reached the place where it is today.

So we must look up to them. Likewise, in Iran, there wasn't any movement, there weren't any unions and teams. Without any agenda, Iranian cinema popped up. I look at our situation and can not put my head around it.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Since The Flute in 2013, you've been to many film festivals. You have received funds from abroad. You have met important people. What are they thinking about Nepal? What is the image that they carry?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

First of all, no one will take an interest in us due to our geography, as the land of Mount Everest or the land of Buddha. It would be a mistake to wish for that. If good films start to come out one after another from a particular country, they will keep an eye on it. During the last 7-8 years, a number of Nepali projects have been selected into labs, markets, residencies and so on. On that basis, I can say that they have a strong interest in Nepal. And this is the right opportunity to prove ourselves, to benefit from their attention, or to groom our local industry. This is a golden opportunity.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Compared to your first film, why your second feature A Year of Cold taking longer to move in production?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

There are other reasons too, but most recently it was COVID. Before COVID, it was difficult to find an actor because the actor must speak Tibetan language. The final reason is financing. That's why it has taken many years, primarily because of COVID, the casting and the season.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*What is the prospective audience and sales and distribution plan of your project A Year of Cold?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

For my current project, my producers are making this strategy. Definitely, we will be more aware about selecting a sales agent. We have not yet fixed a sales agent, though we have been having conversations with sales agents for a long time. We are planning to fix the sales agent at the time of the rough cut. We have different ideas, strategies and plans for the domestic and international release of the movie.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Can you share the names of only three directors who you admire a lot?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

I admire Stanley Kubrick, Terrence Malick and Abbas Kiarostami.

**Prem Prasad Adhikary**

*Finally, what do you believe can be done to grow the presence of Nepali film in world cinema?*

**Min Bahadur Bham**

If I start talking about subjective things, one day is not enough to record all of it. To talk objectively then, we should make good films. Then there is the question: how can we make good films? And then how can a good film be a bridge to reach our goal? If these things are addressed, then the government has to play a vital role in harnessing all of the collective effort and energy. We have to make good films. People like you have to help in the process of making a good film. Good films need to be taken to markets, and we must hunt for sales agents and distributors. The government has to address policy making with a broad vision.

Nowadays, I am positive, excited and made hopeful by the fact that our cinema is becoming more diverse. Previously, we used to speak about the Nepali narrative or Nepali original cinema, which is fruitless. The man who comes from the mountains will narrate his own story. I will narrate my own story. Somebody else will narrate an urban story. Nepal itself is a diverse country. It's multi-lingual. Films in different languages, in different genres about different subject matter are very good for us. All of this will show their collective essence or originality after a certain time period.

- May 1, 2022

**by Prem Prasad Adhikary (adhikaryprem@gmail.com)** is a Nepal-based independent producer and the founder of boutique production company Simal Cinema. He is a graduate of the Nepal Commerce Campus (2008), Oscar International College (2014) as well as an alumnus of Produire au Sud (2020) and Busan Asian Film School (2022). His credits as a producer include *Junko* (2021, Fribourg, Torino, POFF Shorts Tallinn Black Nights film festival), *The Mirage* (2021, Raindance Film Festival), *Divination* (2021, Film School Fest Munich) and *Confusion* (2020, Shorts Mexico, Vancouver and Tasveer South Asian Film Festival).

His upcoming short films *The Witness Tree* by Niranjana Raj Bhetwal, selected for the Berlinale Short Form Station 2021, and *A Bleak Home* by Bidushi Giri are currently in post-production. Projects in development include *The Flowers of Wild Sugarcane*, a feature-length fiction film by Santosh Dahal; *Nitya Nutan*, a short fiction film by Nawa Nidhi Dahal; and *Summer of Goodbyes*, a short fiction film by Minsho Limbu which was selected for the Drama Pitching Lab, 2022 Drama Int'l Short Film Festival, Greece.



# USMAN MUKHTAR

Actor / Filmmaker

Pakistan

Interview by Mustafa Bin Javed

Usman Mukhtar began his career as a filmmaker in 2006 and as a theatre actor in 2007, directing music videos and short films as well as acting in many plays before getting his break as a film actor with a role in the 2016 *Janaan*. He then had a role in the 2018 *Parchi*, a movie for which he was also the cinematographer. In 2019, Mukhtar starred in the Hum TV drama *Anaa*, which marked his acting debut on television after which he did many other TV drama series in the coming years. An upcoming sci-fi movie of Mukhtar, *Umro Ayyar - A New Beginning* is expected to come out in 2022.

Mustafa Bin

Javed

Usman Mukhtar

*How did your journey in filmmaking start?*

Well, when I came into the mainstream industry back in 2006, I was a huge wrestling fan. I used to be a really big fan of The Undertaker. So I used to watch a lot of his videos and download them. Then I came across some software called Windows Movie Maker, and it took me a while, but I started making tribute videos for The Undertaker, with songs. I would show them to my friends. At the time there was this festival happening, the Kara Film Festival, and somebody said to me, you edit and make videos. Why don't you try making a short film? I said, I've never made a short film, I don't know how to, I don't have a camera or anything. But they said, just try it.

So I planned on making a horror slasher film, but we failed miserably because we had no idea how to do it. We didn't have money to get the production on board. You know, construction workers have these bowls where they mix cement in. We had one of those bowls, so my friends and I, we cut it from the middle, put a holder in it and made that into a light. So we used that as a light, and a friend of ours had a DV cam. We had to shoot in a jungle. I specifically remember, we didn't have money to rent out a generator. So we charged a UPS that my friend had, and we took it to the jungle. Now we didn't know that UPS meant uninterrupted power supply. So by the time we took it out, it had already been six or seven hours. We plugged the light in, it turned on and we said, okay action! And then the light went off, and you know, that was our first shooting experience.

That's when I said, now I want to learn filmmaking. I applied to film schools like MET Film School in Ealing Studios, London, and Full Sail University in Florida. And I got a scholarship for both of them. But my family was really against the idea of having me study filmmaking. It's a very typical South Asian family, so they said, "No, you're not going to do filmmaking." I came to my father and said, "Listen, I want to go away. I got a scholarship." But he said, "No, you're not going to go." So I never could. I never did study professionally at film school.

But I learned, I read books. Zeeshan Perwez is a great director and one of the reasons why I became a filmmaker and why I'm where I am today. He was directing a music video for a friend of mine. I watched closely how he directed, and that really gave me courage. Then I started reading a lot of books, watching a lot of lighting tutorials. Before that we never knew that you have to shape the lights you have, we just thought you put a light in front and shoot.

Mustafa Bin

Javed

Usman Mukhtar

*You came to be an actor, director, and cinematographer. How did that happen?*

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to direct. I didn't want to be an actor or a cinematographer. But when I started making films with my friends, filmmaking was really expensive and we didn't have the funds. I mean, we barely had 50 rupees per day. We didn't have the money to hire a cinematographer, we had to learn everything ourselves. So cinematography is an extra skill I picked up very early on. Since then, every time I wanted to shoot something and didn't have the funds to hire a cinematographer, I did it myself. As for acting, a friend of mine was doing a theater play, and he said to me, "I like the way you direct actors. I want you to come and audition for me for my play." So I auditioned and he liked it and said, "You're on board." And it turned out I enjoyed acting

**Usman Mukhtar** on the stage.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *How did you get your start in the mainstream industry?*

**Usman Mukhtar** My first mainstream role was when I did *Janaan*. Before that, I was loving acting in theater and didn't want to do commercial cinema or dramas. But a long time passed and I hadn't gotten anywhere. A lot of my friends had started later than I did, but they went into television and made a name for themselves. Then whenever I'd go to family gatherings, they'd ask, "What are you doing? We don't see you on TV or anywhere." That's when I decided to try some commercial work, and when I got cast in *Janaan* it just started.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *Who are the people that influenced you to be in this industry?*

**Usman Mukhtar** In Pakistan, I would say Rahat Kazmi, Zia Mohiuddin, Moin Akhtar. Among women, Khalida Riyasat was such a great actor. My own mother was an actor too. In the 1950s and 1960s, she was doing Pakistani films back then.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *What was your most recent film?*

**Usman Mukhtar** My last film as an actor was *Parchi*, back in 2017. After that I have been doing television. I'm generally a little picky about dramas, but now even my wife now says, "You need to do more work because you're too picky." As a director, my last short was *Bench* which went to festivals, and it got released last year.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *How has COVID-19 impacted the industry?*

**Usman Mukhtar** It had a strong impact because I think the industry was picking up in Pakistan, and then COVID happened. There were so many films being made, and then they closed the cinemas. For a year, a year and a half, there were no screenings. Films continued being made during COVID as well, but the industry had big losses.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *Are there any upcoming films of yours as an actor?*

**Usman Mukhtar** I've shot two films that are coming out. One of them is a real great opportunity for me. I remember one of my fondest memories in childhood was to go with my mother to a bookstore on Mall Road in Murree. I'd always pick up a few books about the character Umro Ayyar and I'd ask my mother, please read them to me. I was such a fan... it was a real fantasy world.

And then recently during COVID, our house completely locked down. We were worried about my mother's health, and didn't want her to catch it. I didn't take work for seven or eight months, and the only thing I was doing was eating a lot of junk food and gaming. So I'd gained a lot of weight as well. When the COVID situation improved a bit, I got a call from Azfar Jafri, who directed me in *Janaan* and *Parchi*. Azfar is a very, very dear friend of mine, and he had mentioned that he was working on something very special. We met, and when he saw me he said, "What happened to you?" I said, "I've just been gaming." And he said, "So there's this movie we want to shoot. It's *Umro Ayyar*." As soon as I heard that, I said, "I'm in, I don't care what role." Then he said I was going to play Umro Ayyar. I said,

**Usman Mukhtar**

"Look at me. I don't look like Umro Ayyar." And he replied, "Well, we have till December, so start working out now." My trainer told me it was going to be very difficult, but I said I'd do whatever I needed in order to play Umro Ayyar.

So we ended up doing it, and this movie is Pakistan's first sci-fi action film made on such a big scale. It was an absolute pleasure working on this movie. We had crew that had come in to Pakistan from different countries, really, really talented and creative people. The environment that we shot it in, it was amazing. It was an extremely humbling and amazing experience for all of us.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *How do you think the industry has changed from the past?*

**Usman Mukhtar** That was a completely different era. My mother is from that era, and she tells me actors would do two to three shifts a day, finishing at one set and then going to another. They took their work very seriously at that time. It was around the late 1970s when the downfall started happening, and afterwards we started making films for a specific niche, which was the Gandasa culture, and the Punjabi films being made for that nation.

We no longer had a proper industry, but the revival started happening back in 2007 or 2008. *Ramchand Pakistani* came out then. There was also another really nice movie *Khamoosh Paani* (Silent Water), followed by others like *Khuda Kay Liye* (In The Name Of God), *Bol* (Speak), and *Waar* (The Strike). That was the time when films started getting made properly again.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *Does this sense of professionalism currently exist, like it did in the past era?*

**Usman Mukhtar** At that point we had proper studios. Last December I shot another film, it's a cop movie. We shot it in Bari Studios, and it was heartbreaking to see what that studio has become. Most studios now are rented out to different brands for them to use as warehouses.

So it's sad when a studio is not operating as a studio, and they're renting it out to make ends meet. We don't have proper sound stages. In the past we did, we had actors working in shifts, but we're in a very hybrid state right now.

Technologically we have a lot, but professionally we don't have unions for the crew and the grip department and all of that. We don't have secretariats for them. In that way, we're not there yet. And we need to be. We need to make departments. We need to make unions. We need studios.

**Mustafa Bin Javed** *What were the specific reasons that led the industry to its downfall?*

**Usman Mukhtar** I think somewhere in the middle we kind of stopped making an effort. And I feel like cinema became more of a business, rather than a creative thing. I believe very strongly that if your content is good, people are going to watch it. I think if you make good content, you will make money. I think that's what's happening now, but back then we didn't keep up the quality.

**Mustafa Bin**

**Javed**

**Usman Mukhtar**

*Do you think censorship or having the wrong person for the job might have led us here?*

It happens when you stop making an effort. What I mean by effort is spending a good amount of time on a script, and researching who's right for the role, not just who you can get easily. If you're thinking, "Oh, let's do it for less money, and then we'll make more profits," that's what's going to happen. But in some ways that's happening now as well. I know so many good filmmakers, but many haven't been able to direct a feature. I've been trying to make a feature for a very long time too, but I don't want to do a full-out commercial one. I don't mean I'm going to do a very serious art film that nobody's going to understand. You can make a good film that doesn't have all the *masala* (spices) in it, you know? But producers don't want that, our producers want *masala*. Producers want something very illogical, like you make the hero jump on the car, the car mirrors kind of burst, and that's the entrance of your hero. I believe in making certain things very logical, but we don't focus on that. We focus on the over the top.

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**Usman Mukhtar**

*Do you think we have good producers?*

Basically I feel like it. People generally think that the producers are just the ones who give the money, but it's important what they do with it, how they resource everything. There are good producers in Pakistan, but bad producers as well. But I feel like we need to give more opportunities to young people like yourself, or to give opportunities based on merit.

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**Javed**

**Usman Mukhtar**

*Did film artists and technicians get impacted by the downturn?*

It impacted them the most, the technical departments. Because that's what they live on. Actors make so much money that they also start side businesses. So they can earn money from that, but these guys, they work on shifts and if they have no work, what do they do? That's why I think we need to have unions for these crewmembers. If an outbreak like this happens again, what will happen to them? They need some kind of insurance, so that they and their families can get by in that time.

**Mustafa Bin**

**Javed**

**Usman Mukhtar**

*How do you see female representation in the industry?*

It's not enough. We need to make more movies based on female protagonists. There was one recently, *Motorcycle Girl*, that was based on a female protagonist, but apart from that there's very little. I think India is doing a lot with female protagonists. I saw *Rashmi Rocket*, and *Mardani*, and other films that are female-centric. I think we need to do more. It's not like we lack stories, we have so many stories.

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**Javed**

**Usman Mukhtar**

*What role can female filmmakers play in this regard?*

Female directors are trying really hard, but I really feel like it's up to the producers. At the end of the day, you need funds to take an idea on paper and get it implemented. That's where the producers come in, and I think our producers need to take this up.

**Mustafa Bin**

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**Usman Mukhtar**

*How do you see the recent films made in Pakistan?*

There are good films coming out as well. Like *Lal Kabootar* (Red Pigeon), and *Cake*.

**Usman Mukhtar**

I haven't seen *Motorcycle Girl*, but I've heard good things about it. Good films are coming out, but I feel like we need to do more. We need to tell different stories. We can't be making same formula movies over and over with three boys and three girls, the typical story that you add a few songs to. We have such great stories in this country, but we don't focus on them because this formula is easier. Our directors and producers really need to work hard. It requires research, and all of that takes time.

I'll give you an example – Bollywood made a movie called *Milkha Singh* that was based on a 1000 meter run by Milkha Singh, right? Pakistan has Abdul Khaliq who was even faster than Milkha Singh, he's a 500 meter runner if I'm not wrong. Why can't we make a movie about him? Why not? Because there's a lot of research required for that. And we've gotten used to doing things so easily, we're probably not ready to kind of make that kind of effort.

**Mustafa Bin**

**Javed**

**Usman Mukhtar**

*Do you think the film business is sustainable in Pakistan?*

It is, if we do things right. If we had more cinemas, more people would come and watch films. I think we need to have single screen cinemas as well, for people who can't afford to go and watch a film for 300 or 400 rupees. We're not reaching that audience. We used to have single screen cinemas, and they showed other kinds of films, like *Gandasa*. You want that cinema culture. The elite will not go to the cinema and start dancing to the songs. You know, they're too vogue for that. But that's the culture in India and Pakistan. You have songs and people love dancing in the cinema and everything, but this audience will not do that. So you need single screens to cater to people who cannot afford to pay 300 or 400 rupees to go watch a movie.

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**Usman Mukhtar**

*Do writers and directors get their due credit in the industry?*

No, I don't think so. What really annoys me is the fact that our technical team is not recognized. I feel that's very wrong because if you see how hard they work, they are the first people to come on set. They're the last to leave. Their job is the hardest and we don't give them credit. They're the real heroes. As actors, we can go on set, we can act, then we can go back to our tents or our vanities, and we can sit down. But these people are constantly working, you know? I feel like there has to be another way for them to get recognized.

And writers don't get proper credit. Normal people who go to the cinema, if you go ask them who wrote this movie that you just saw, most of them won't know the name of the writer. They know the name of the actor and actress. They also might know the name of the director, but they won't know who wrote it. Even the directors, in Pakistan we don't have people describing a film as so and so director's film. Like, this is a Christopher Nolan film, this is a Martin Scorsese film. We don't have that.

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**Usman Mukhtar**

*What do you think of the OTT platforms?*

I feel Netflix should invest in Pakistan, which they don't. I could be wrong, but I haven't seen any original Netflix series or film come out of Pakistan. And I feel like that's very unfair because we have extremely talented filmmakers. In the independent cinema scene, we have some really, really good directors, upcoming student filmmakers, who can make

**Usman Mukhtar**

great content.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Will cinema be able to compete with the OTT platforms in Pakistan in the future?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

You know, most people say that OTT is the future of films and series. I disagree. I feel that no matter what happens, there's a difference between you sitting at home, watching a film on Netflix, and going to the cinema, having popcorn and watching a movie on the big screen. The cinema has its own charm, just as Netflix and other platforms have their own charm.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Do you think people are film literate in Pakistan?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

You don't have to be. I feel people don't have to be, people just have to go and enjoy the movies that they like. Film literacy is important for critics, and I don't think we have those kinds of critics here right now.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Do you think that people from the industry are interested in film festivals?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

A lot of young filmmakers are very much interested in festivals. They keep asking, where do we apply? But we have very few festivals. So the best place is Film Freeway. What film festivals do for young filmmakers is firstly to give them a platform. Secondly, it gives them that courage and confidence that yes, you've made a good product. If a young filmmaker is considering quitting filmmaking, and if he sends it to a festival and they recognize the film, he might continue with it. Festivals are very important.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Would the industry would be willing to organize more festivals?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

I really hope so. I haven't heard of anything yet, but I really hope that they do. I think, in the future they might.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Is the TV industry more empowered, recognized and successful than the film industry?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

Absolutely! Our country's biggest industry is television, film is not! I think it's the complete opposite with our neighboring country. India. Their film industry is really big, but our TV industry is huge, absolutely.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Do you think there might be a decline in that regard due to the OTT platforms?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

Not at all? The problem is that in Pakistan, we don't have OTTs with Pakistani content. We have Zee5, I think, but Zee5 has been banned. It's reopening maybe, but for now it's in the gray zone. Again my disappointment towards Netflix. Netflix doesn't make any Pakistani content, I don't know why. There's no other platform in Pakistan right now. There are a few local platforms, but they don't have enough viewership. So right now there really isn't an OTT platform where people can make series or films and put them up. The only source of entertainment for people are the TV channels and their dramas. So I don't think that has changed. It could in the future, if the platforms become more active, but not right now.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*What do you think about the stories told on TV?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

I get a lot of stuff that I have to say no to, because stories are not great. One thing that made me really happy was the drama *Parizaad*, which was very different and it gave me hope that if this is doing well in Pakistan, then producers might be inclined to make more of that kind of content. But I haven't seen anything else like that.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*What role can the government play to uplift the Pakistani film industry?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

Firstly to recognize it. I mean, to recognize the television industry, film, the entertainment industry. I feel that's very important. And I don't know what procedures would be needed, but I do feel that the government should allot land where studios could be built. And to make it make it easier for people to get permits to shoot. It's an entire process which needs to be improved.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*How do you feel about certain segments of society opposing certain film releases?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

I feel we need to have a rating system for movies. You can talk about freedom of speech, but we do need a ratings system. But it's not been addressed yet. It's not going to happen until we have a proper government body in place.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*How do you think Pakistani films impact our society?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

Our people love going to watch movies, those who can afford it. They go and really enjoy themselves. They want to escape reality. They don't want to watch the news and what's happening in the world. And it impacts them very positively in that way. I mean, we see that when we do promotions for our movies at universities or in malls and such, people are just excited because we have a different kind of culture.

But I feel like you should also make the kind of content that the audience needs right now, to also educate them in a way. It has more to do with TV dramas, because our movies are not seen as much. But almost everybody watches Pakistani TV dramas, and it's a very good platform to educate people on what's right and what's not, in a very subtle manner.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Do you have any specific message to upcoming filmmakers, actors, and technicians in Pakistan?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

I would just like to say, don't give up, work hard and never sell out. Believe in what you believe in. Don't settle for anything less.

**Mustafa Bin Javed**

*Would you like to share something about your production house?*

**Usman Mukhtar**

We started a production company called Eastern Terrestrial Studios. It's something we wanted to do, to make content that we believe in, and to do things slightly differently. We want the actors and everybody to be comfortable. Our point was that actors should be excited to work with ET Studios, you know?

And we also want to give a platform to young actors who show merit, talent and creativity.

## **Usman Mukhtar**

We'll give opportunities to good singers, good actors, and good scriptwriters. I see so many young people who have a lot of potential, but don't get opportunities, and that's so sad. I don't think it's fair that if a singer goes viral with some song that they performed, they are given a chance to act just because everybody's talking about them. It's not fair to those in the field who are actually talented.

I remember, I was shooting a movie in Lahore and I went to the studio at eight in the morning. When I got out of the car there was a young guy standing outside. He had a backpack and I thought, maybe he's come to meet the director, or some production department. We're sitting inside and then he comes and says, "I'm an actor. I've been trying for a very long time, and I haven't been able to get an opportunity. I heard there was shooting going on, so I wanted to come and try my luck." I asked to see some of his work. Then I took him to our directors, and he showed us footage of some street theater that he had done. And it was so good. I had a moment of realization about how many rejections this kid must have had, that he came and stood outside the studio at eight in the morning. It broke my heart. It just feels like we're doing injustice to our talent. So our goal for this is to make good content and also to give a platform those actors, musicians, and scriptwriters who don't get an opportunity.

- May 2, 2022

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Mustafa Bin Javed (www.mustafabinjaved@gmail.com)** is a filmmaker from Islamabad, Pakistan. He has been making short films and documentary films to share impactful and meaningful stories. He owns a production company named Emmbeejaay Productions based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Mustafa is also a Busan Asian Film School 2022 fellow.



# MARA MARASIGAN

Spokesperson of Inter-Guild Alliance (IGA)

Philippines

Interview by Carmina Cruz

Mara Marasigan is the daughter of Filipino actress Irma Adlawan and film/theatre/TV director Dennis Marasigan. She started working in the Philippine independent film industry in 2007. Her works as assistant director include the Cinemalaya film *Liway*, *Kung Paano Ako Naging Leading Lady the Musical* (stage play), and Philippine unit for the Irish psychological thriller *Nocebo* directed by Lorcan Finnegan.

IGA is an alliance of advertising and film workers in the Philippines. It is composed of the Directors' Guild of the Philippines, League of Filipino Actors, Lupon ng mga Pilipinong Sinematograpo, Line Producers and Production Managers Group, Philippine Independent Producers Group, Filipino Screenwriters' Group, Production Design Circle of the Philippines, Sound Speed Philippines, Stuntmen Association, Filipino Film Editors, Guild of Assistant Directors and Script Supervisors, and Kapisanan ng mga Assistant Directors sa Patalastas. IGA is also affiliated with Commercial and Production Houses Group, and Advertising Inter-Department Organization.

Carmina Cruz

*How did you start in the industry?*

Mara Marasigan

Both my parents work in theater, television and film. In 2007, my dad did a Cinemalaya film and he asked me if I wanted to be part of it. So I was a wardrobe assistant for his film, but his assistant director was also the production manager and wasn't on set most of the time. So me and the script continuity, Sheenly, started acting as assistant directors because there wasn't one on set. That was the first instance and then I thought, "Yeah, it's okay, maybe I like making films," but they always say there's no money in it, you can't really earn a living from it, so I didn't really think of pursuing that path until a couple of years later.

Teddy Manotoc, who was a new director then, was having problems keeping an assistant director, so one of his actors who also worked for my dad's film asked me and Sheenly if we wanted to work as assistant directors. So I said, "Yes, sure." I didn't have a background in film. The only thing I did was acting in the past and production work on my dad's film. But I said yes. I didn't know that Sheenly was also hired, so there were two of us. Both of us became assistant directors on our first gig in that film and it was terrible. There are so many things we did wrong. So many people hated us. I remember there's this cinematographer who was Fil-Am, a huge guy who asked me, "How old are you?" and I said, "I am 18." And he said, "You have no business being an assistant director." And I was like, "What does that mean?" I didn't know if he was telling me that I was too young or because I didn't know what I was doing. But both were correct.

But after that I started getting offers to become assistant director again for films. So I really started off my career in cinema as wardrobe assistant and then jumped immediately to assistant director. After a while I worked in television where I got most of my hardcore training because television was so difficult. And then I went into advertising.

Now I am mostly doing advertising unless I really, really like the project or the director is a good friend. That is the only time I do films. But I did one last year (2021), an international film with an Irish director. They have Eva Green as their main actor, but we didn't have Eva here. We shot the Philippine scenes and I was the assistant director for that.

So basically it was all accidental, I just braved up because I really wanted to jump on anything that was offered to me. I didn't know what I was doing but it kept on coming. I hoped I learned a lot when I did it after several years. But that was how I started.

Carmina Cruz

*What made you stay and continue assistant directing?*

Mara Marasigan

I'd love to say it's the people. For the longest time, maybe because I started really young, I came across a lot of mean people in the industry, like really mean. But then it kind of highlighted the best ones too. Like one of my favorite cinematographers, a Filipino who is such a grumpy guy. He gets pissed easily. But he gets pissed because he is really professional at what he is doing. And that instance of seeing and meeting people better than me, it always makes me want to be better at my job.

And then, even if something is so difficult to put up, at the end of it you have this feeling that you are part of that. I made that. And even when I see films I did in the past or

**Mara Marasigan**

projects I did in the past, there's always a memory that accompanies it that makes me want to share more. So I guess that is why I have always been here and stayed.

**Carmina Cruz**

*How did you become part of the Inter-Guild Alliance?*

**Mara Marasigan**

That was also an accident. During the pandemic, a lot of people wanted to go back to work. A lot of people depend on day-to-day shoots and are in a 'no-work, no-pay' situation, so we see a lot of people getting hungry, a lot of people getting sick in the industry and we didn't know how to help because we didn't have money either. Nobody had work. So a bunch of the groups, like us assistant directors, we started coming together to discuss how we are going to proceed and protect the people.

On the first day of the meeting of the assistant directors, we got an invitation, that apparently the Directors' Guild of the Philippines (DGPI) and Lupon ng mga Pilipinong Sinematograpo (LPS) were discussing putting protocols in place, but they needed representatives from different organizations. So they heard that the assistant directors were getting together that same day. We got their message while we were meeting and the first question was, "Who wants to go?" But we had no idea what was going to happen, we just knew that it was going to be an open discussion, and it was last minute that I said, "Yeah, I think I can go." And so I attended that meeting that also started the Inter-Guild Alliance. It was really an accident, I wasn't a representative of anybody, I wasn't assigned by anybody, it was only because I was available that day.

In that same meeting, Paolo Villaluna who is the president of DGPI, was so excited to have people from different job descriptions come together, saying, this is the first time that this has happened with representatives from the production designers, the assistant directors, producers. Then there were so many other people – the writers were also there – so he was like, "We should keep each other posted and continue discussing," and we did. We actually spent hundreds of hours discussing things on Zoom together and that was how it started. The current board members of the Inter-Guild Alliance now were the ones who were present from the very beginning.

**Carmina Cruz**

*How was the journey of IGA, from developing health and safety protocols to implementing it?*

**Mara Marasigan**

It was very torturous because there are so many people coming from different departments, and each department was protecting a certain aspect of their work. For example, the producers, because they are the ones greatly affected when it comes to giving out money, they were trying to make sure that it stays in the more economical side of things. Of course they wanted everybody to be safe, but they didn't know how they were going to implement a 30% to 40% increase in budget. And then the assistant directors, we were very stubborn, we wanted to push back on everything like we don't want segues or changing locations in a day because for us we found that the need to be safe coincided with the need to be efficient. So it means to limit the number of people on set and things like that. We were always on the same side as the cinematographers, which was funny because we don't usually get along on set, but they were also protecting a lot of their members since they already have a pool of cinematographers.

**Mara Marasigan**

So there was a lot of back and forth. We would have group meetings with the other departments but before we could decide on anything we had to go back to our group and tell them and discuss again. For a 40-page document, we'd go through each and single page and every single section, and if there was a discussion that needed to be addressed we had to bring it back to our groups and then back to the Inter-Guild Alliance. So that was a long, long process. Then we got a lot of pushback because even though the industry wanted to make strict implementation of certain rules, it was not under the government mandate and so we couldn't implement that to the private companies and private productions. We had to follow what the government was implementing. For example, when it comes to testing, we cannot mandate it because it wasn't mandated by the government, and for them we don't need testing to go back to work. But we want testing to go back to work because we are always in close contact. The actors, they don't wear mask on set and during that time we were the only industry that needed to take masks off to be able to produce something.

We had discussions with Department of Health (DOH), we had health and medical consultants, we called in people from University of the Philippines, and then we reviewed a lot of the pandemic implementations from different countries including Korea, Ireland, Hollywood, from the Producers Guild of America. We had to review all of those and that's how we got some of the terminologies like the pod system. There was a lot of research that went into it. And then there was a lot of study of law also, because that was when we found out that safety officers are actually required in the industry but it's never been practiced in the Philippines. And so we got in touch with Congressman Toff De Venecia who is a really big champion in the creative industry in the Philippines. So yes, there were lots and lots of meetings and pushback from different agencies.

We had to talk to the big producers. and of course they didn't agree on everything because they couldn't afford it. And then when it came to implementation, the response to it was huge in the beginning, like there were people who really implemented it and we were thankful for the big groups like the Commercial Production Houses Group who implemented it in the advertising side. But then there are those small productions who are so used to working for 24 hours, they started popping up and the main challenge was who was going to monitor all these things?

It's well and good if people are willing to follow with self-regulation, but there were outliers that sometimes were so intense. We got calls that all the staff were stuck because someone tested positive for COVID, and the production wouldn't let them go home and they didn't know what to do. There were urgent things like that that needed addressing and until now it is still a big discussion about what are we going to do with those who violate protocols. We know that it's wrong, we know that we are doing it for the benefit of everybody but there are still some who feel like they can get away with it. Those are the problems that we face during implementation and we are still facing it now.

**Carmina Cruz**

*I do think that it helps because it kind of creates a culture. Like for instance, since I am already aware of what is proper, if a director or producer approached me and I know that they don't comply with the protocols, I now have the courage to say, "No, I am not going to work for you."*

**Mara Marasigan**

That was part of the discussion also. That the only way we can actually implement all

**Mara Marasigan**

these things even after the lockdowns and pandemic is to really empower each and every person. To let them know that you can say no, that you can demand these things. It is a Filipino culture that we are so polite, we don't like confrontations, it's hard to haggle for what we think our worth is. There was also the toll, if you are already out of work for four months can you really afford to say no to a project even though you know it's breaking protocols. But I am actually happy to say that there are a lot more people willing to stand by what they know is right rather than just attending to their immediate needs. There are a few who have gotten in trouble who have sort of created a distrust in the industry but there are also a lot of people who are willing to make this kind of change for the better.

**Carmina Cruz**

*If I remember it right, when the safety protocols first came out IGA had some sort of conflict with Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP). What happened to that and how was it resolved?*

**Mara Marasigan**

The original plan was to make recommendations to FDCP to have one document for all protocols. We found that FDCP was discussing with the producers asking them what they want implemented, things like that. And then we said that we'd like to chime in, that the different groups would like to chime in, so that we can hear from all the departments and the production. Then FDCP jumped the gun and released a document that was not agreed upon by the groups nor the producers. So the producers were irked because we were in the middle of discussions, and then an article came out about Liza Dino saying what was discussed. When those weren't actually finalized. So we went back to her and to tell her that some of these things won't fly.

For example, I think there was a 16-hour working day that didn't include ingress and egress on the FDCP document. We said that's basically the pre-pandemic hours—16 hours plus ingress and egress which is basically 20 to 24 hours depending on the set up so we said that shouldn't be. So we talked to FDCP and they released the document again. So there's another commotion because here was a document being worked on by I think 300 to 500 people, we were working so hard on it and then without our knowledge something else comes out. Something else that wasn't discussed thoroughly or has repercussions in a certain department.

So eventually IGA decided to separate from the FDCP document and release a Pro-Guide instead. We felt like there was always miscommunication on both our ends, that it was getting harder to work with FDCP at that point. Particularly because their concerns are very different from the concerns of the film workers, and they patterned a lot of their protocols from other countries – which we did also, but we took out those that weren't relevant to the Filipino movie industry. And so when we decided to separate, IGA went to different government agencies to get their endorsement. So right now there are two documents that exist, the FDCP's and the IGA Pro-Guide. The IGA Pro-Guide is still stricter so we pushed the companies to use the Pro-Guide because we feel it will benefit more people. But then we can't mandate them to follow it because we're not a government agency. We're endorsed by DOH and Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) but then again, FDCP also has an existing document with DOH and everybody else. The last one that they released we were able to review more thoroughly, and was better-versed in helping out the workers. But the Pro-Guide still exists so there are actually two guides co-existing. But the advertising group, they always say that they are not under FDCP so they

**Mara Marasigan**

follow the Pro-Guide. It's the same with the television group.

So there's still a lot of kinks with the discussion of IGA and FDCP and then there's also Film Academy of the Philippines so it's difficult to balance these things but FDCP still invites the IGA for a lot of other projects. We still work with them in certain things, but we minimize it and we don't endorse being part of FDCP. So we're like a totally independent group that is not affiliated with any of the government agencies that deals with culture and the arts.

**Carmina Cruz**

*But FDCP recognizes the IGA, right? I heard that they gave an award to IGA recently.*

**Mara Marasigan**

Yes, they gave IGA an award for pandemic response, I think. And yes, we still work with them when it comes to research and other things. But when it comes to speaking for the community, IGA is still very much separate from FDCP. And there are still a lot of groups in IGA who want to be represented by IGA rather than FDCP, because they always point out that FDCP is a government agency focused on welfare and promotion rather than representation.

**Carmina Cruz**

*I am interested to know your personal experience on film work before the pandemic and after health and safety protocols were set in place.*

**Mara Marasigan**

I think the biggest change really is the working hours. Especially when I was in TV, but even in advertising and film, we never went below 18 hours on a regular day. It's always 18 to 24 hours. The most I've done shooting for a TV series was 48 hours, sleeping in between locations, so we're just sleeping in the van and all that. That's the biggest change. Working pre-pandemic I never thought that I could go to work in the morning and go home in time for dinner, in this industry at the very least. I like that more people are more versed when it comes to safety. Before it was all about a lot of passion and doing it for the vision, but now people are also concerned about not just making great art but also making sure that the people go home to see their families.

When I was young and very naïve, I used to shoot stunt scenes. Like we have a "stunt driver," (quote and quote because we don't really have certification for stunt drivers in the Philippines), and I'd be in front or I'd be in the back then we'd crash the car as part of the scene and of course what we use was always old cars because we were going to wreck it. There were also times we had to cross in the middle of EDSA highway just to get the shot. Those things make for a great story but then you also realize how reckless the industry becomes about getting that perfect shot. And it shouldn't be. That's one of my biggest learnings, that if you're really good, you are not supposed to risk your life just to be able to get your perfect shot. You can create your perfect shot without putting anybody in danger.

And there's also the amount of professionalism and responsibility needed for a set to actually work. Before you had 100 to 200 people, sometimes 300 or more on set, one job done by three people. But then during the pandemic we had to downsize so you saw who the really good ones were. If you had to choose 50 people on set you had to choose the best. You had to choose those who can manage and those who can deliver in the limited time allotted. Paolo Villaluna always says this, it kind of tangentially professionalized the

**Mara Marasigan**

whole industry, because people had to step up. Directors cannot go on set not knowing what to do because we only have 14 hours that day. Assistant directors had to be on top of their game because every minute delay will take a toll on the production. The producers became more efficient in hiring food and in paying people. There was a big boom of digital transfers so that people didn't touch money on set. People went home early because they were required to have GCash or bank transfers, and they didn't have to wait until pack up to actually receive their salary, especially for those who work on a per day basis. And everything was planned which is how it should've been before, but back then a lot of us in the production were winging it because we knew we can extend the hours. And even the actors started being trained to cater for themselves because they cannot bring their assistants on set. And for you to actually risk your life to go out and work, you chose the things that are either financially good for you or something that you really had to do.

Then there's also that realization that we are so far off from getting the groove of these things, like creating a community that is not only emotionally sustainable but also is physically and mentally for our film workers. I kind of realized that my dream for the industry is for it to become really something sustainable, not just for the producers but for every single worker. That even if you don't have work for a month to six months, you have savings and you don't have to worry about working 24/7, working every day, and you can actually take vacations and all that.

**Carmina Cruz**

*This was somehow covered earlier but let me ask for examples.  
What happens when someone reports a violation to IGA?*

**Mara Marasigan**

That is a pretty tricky thing now. When IGA started working on the protocols, everybody expected that IGA will be in charge of implementing it. But part of the goal of IGA is for the industry to become a self-regulating body. It actually leads into trying to unionize the different workers, because if you look at Korea, or the US, Hollywood, Bollywood, there's really great benefit for unionization. Also if there is a community that protects you, you don't have to fight your battles alone. Though one of the things we were pushing from the very beginning is self-regulation. We didn't want to be under the Department of Labor when it comes to regulating these protocols, and we also didn't want to be part of FDCP and give FDCP power over workers, because that is not part of their mandate. That will just mess things around.

So we were pushing for [self-regulation] from the very beginning, also because we didn't have the manpower. IGA still is composed of volunteers from the different groups that are part of IGA. So we are still working, we're active professionals, and sometimes three of us will work in a film together so we'd be out for like three months and someone had to take on their responsibilities. So there's really no way for IGA to monitor all of these things as well as the implementation. We started creating a process wherein part of the idea of empowering the workers was that if you have a complaint within your production, or if you see something wrong in the production, we inform all the members and we brief them. We even came out with an infographic that the first thing you're supposed to do is bring it up with the production. It has to be an internal thing first. IGA, your guild, cannot meddle with it because if you see that there is something wrong, it should be part of your responsibility to call it out.

**Mara Marasigan**

So for example, you called it out and the production didn't do anything about it, you're supposed to go to your guild which is part of the path to unionization. The guild should protect you, your group should protect you. So for the assistant directors, every time something happens in a set, like a problem with the client, extension of hours and all that, they inform the group immediately. And then the group discusses what's supposed to be done so the group should be able to act in your behalf. But then since we don't have a group for every single worker, or some of the workers aren't part of certain groups, they should be able to ask the help of their fellow workers to speak up with them. Not for them but with them.

Now if the production still does not pay attention to that, that is the only time that it can be elevated to IGA. IGA may coordinate on your behalf although what we've been doing is really just giving advice to what the workers can do. Like there was this instance with a Department of Education project that the payment for the workers was delayed for six months or so, what we did is we got in touch with some legal representatives and we informed them of what they could do to address that with the production. In all reality, IGA doesn't really have the mandate nor the power to implement all these things. When we tried to help out, some of the bigger productions would always say they are not part of IGA, or not all are members of IGA, so we can't speak for them. That was a big struggle but we are working on informing everybody, and I think it's been catching on. So that's how we addressed the complaints in the past, but yes we also lack manpower. We've been meaning to tap to more people and a secretariat to at least do all the grievances, but it is hard at this point. Down the line we are hoping for something like that.

**Carmina Cruz**

*Were there a lot of complaints?*

**Mara Marasigan**

Sometimes. But the thing is it's such a small industry so if one production exceeds working hours, by the following morning every one of us in the board or maybe five out of seven would know about it already. Somebody would have brought it up to us. There were productions that tried to bribe people in such a way that they'd say, "We're doing this for our love of film," and we hear that from the crew which is good because they know that there is something wrong. I mean it hasn't come to the point that they can stand up for their selves and walk out, but I heard of at least one instance that the crew really decided to pack up.

**Carmina Cruz**

*Are there any future plans from IGA with regards to film workers' welfare?*

**Mara Marasigan**

We've been working closely with Congressman Toff De Venecia to be able to push for the Eddie Garcia Bill and the Freelancers' Bill. We were originally spearheading a project with Vice President Leni Robredo for vaccination under her office, so IGA is like the project manager. We have a grant from Quezon City Cinema (QCinema) where a certain amount is given to the groups so they can push projects they've been meaning to do. I know one of the groups is archiving photos of their members. For us (assistant directors) we are trying to make a website and provide additional training to assistant directors. Since we can't aim for every single worker, it's mostly catering to those who are already members of groups, because it's easier to reach out to them. We are hoping to keep IGA running just to be able to monitor the welfare of the workers, because when the pandemic came we realized that there was really nobody speaking for us. We had to stand up for

**Mara Marasigan**

ourselves, we had to tell people that even though we are not essential workers that doesn't mean that we are not relevant to society.

**Carmina Cruz**

*Can you share what the Eddie Garcia Bill and Freelancers' Bill are and how are they different from each other?*

**Mara Marasigan**

The Eddie Garcia Bill deals a lot more with safety in the creative industries. It was launched after Tito Eddie got into an accident, a fatal mistake that caused his death. There were a lot of petitions to make the workplace a safer place after that, so that includes looking into working hours, safety officers, protocols on set and all that. The Freelancers' Bill deals not only with the creative industries but all the freelancers in general. So this includes having night differential for overnight pay, and there's a discussion about transportation allowance for out of town. So the Freelancers' Bill is actually for a lot more industries, even fashion, music and all that.

**Carmina Cruz**

*To wrap it up, on a personal level what else do you think we film workers need?*

**Mara Marasigan**

I always believe that there should be some sort of standardization when it comes to hiring film workers and people in the creative industries. In the US, you can't work unless you are part of a union, which is beneficial for both sides. You cannot work if you are not part of a union but then when you are part of a union, the union is there to protect you as well. We have a great sense of community as Filipinos in general, so I really think that it will work for all of us to have guilds to collectively protect all workers, because as we realized during the pandemic, there was no governing body or agency that was actually protecting our welfare.

And then when we went into the pandemic, IGA realized how many things we were lacking in comparison to the other countries, not in terms of artistic capability but in terms of providing a safe workplace for our people. Looking to the future, we want to make sure that it's going to be sustainable. We've heard a lot of stories of film workers dying of heart attack, because of long working hours, or high stress situations. There are people dropping out of the industry because it's a tough place to be, and it's made tougher by the conditions that we have. We were able to tap into a lot of international artists and film workers during the pandemic, and we heard their stories and how well they are protected, but it had to start from somewhere. It had to start from somebody who was willing to speak up for the benefit of the workers. We've been so used to this sort of treatment and conditions that we've accepted it as normal. But now that we've seen that it can be improved, we should always work for improvement. There is no way that we can produce great films if the people who are working are not happy in making films. So it has to be not only financially sustainable, which is another whole big discussion on standardization of rates and all that, but I really feel that the next thing is protecting each other and pushing each other to have better working conditions, better working relationships with our producers. There has to be an open conversation and an on-going conversation to be able to express our grievances and what works.

There is this group called the Advertising Inter-Department Organization which I am also part of. It's actually similar to IGA, but a smaller group mostly for advertising. We created a seminar of sorts wherein each department from the advertising world were given four

**Mara Marasigan**

questions to answer: (1) What is working for you now? (2) How can we improve? (3) How can people better follow? (4) What are the practices you want returned or retained after the pandemic? And we had 400 to 500 people attending that so it was an eye-opener that a lot of people had something to say, or wanted to learn from others to make sure that their workplace is a better place for everybody. So there's that effort from everyone. But it has to be pushed more. It has to be a consistent thing. IGA has been having a lot of problems with that because we are working as individuals, but I hope and I wish that somebody can carry that on. Right now we already have the momentum of getting people together and getting people to speak. We need to be able to support that foundation and make sure that it continues.

And we really have to self-regulate because the moment you don't call out something that you feel is like a mistake or is not good for everybody, it will continue and people will try to get away with it until they get caught. But people had already suffered at that point, not only with COVID but also in mental and emotional health so we really have to watch out for that.

I hope there are better partnerships with government agencies because that's really a big thing. Having Congressman Toff champion a lot of the bills, and really attending and supporting these practices and protocols, we could not have gone far without him, and even without the FDCP because there has to be private and public partnership in the set-up of the Philippines.

I hope we don't go back to practices pre-pandemic because now we have proven that we can actually do it and produce the same quality, even though it's a little pricier. We can move forward with making it a more financially sustainable thing for everybody –from directors, producers, to utility, to your drivers, to your security guards, to barangay tanods (barangay public safety officer) in the streets. That's what I hope and what I want to carry out of this, and I hope IGA will continue to be part of it.

*- April 20, 2022*

**by** **Carmina Cruz (minacruz@gmail.com)** is an actor and filmmaker from Bulacan, Philippines. She started The DistantPlay Project, a platform for actors to continue practicing during the COVID-19 lockdowns and depict the plight of Filipinos during the pandemic, that received a story fellowship grant from Better Engagement Between East and SouthEast Asia in 2021. Cruz is a SEAPitch 2021 and Busan Asian Film School 2022 fellow.



# ERIK MATTI

Director / Producer / Media Entrepreneur

Philippines

Interview by Danzen Katanyag

Erik Matti is an internationally-acclaimed filmmaker from the Philippines. Born in Bacolod, Western Visayas, he started his career as the co-writer of the Filipino cult classic *Magic Temple* in 1996. His most critically acclaimed and commercially successful works include *On The Job*, *Honor Thy Father*, *Seklusyon* and *BuyBust*, which screened at international festivals from Bucheon, Toronto, Fribourg and Sitges to Tokyo, Neuchatel, Udine and Cannes. He also directed the Philippine episode in the HBO Asia series *Food Lore*, entitled *Island of Dreams*, for which he won Best Director at the 2020 ContentAsia Awards.

In 2021, his film *OTJ 2: The Missing Eight* was screened in the main competition of the 78th Venice Film Festival, where it received a five-minute standing ovation and praise from filmmakers Chloe Zhao and Boon Jong-Ho.

Beyond his work as a director, Matti has also shaped the Filipino film industry as the Co-Founder and Co-Owner (with Dondon Monteverde) of the production company Reality Multimedia Studios and the distribution company and streaming service, Upstream.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*Thank you so much, Direk, for being here. Let's start in your hometown, Bacolod. Tell me about growing up in Bacolod in the 70s, if you could share anything about that.*

**Erik Matti**

I was born in 1970. I guess you could say I was a lucky birth, because in 1969 Marcos won, and my mom and dad's occupation was based on Marcos. So when he won, they decided, "We can afford a sixth child". I was born premature, in 1970, on December 21. I grew up in Bacolod and stayed there until I was 22 years old, that's when I moved to Manila. I am the youngest of six siblings. We had a provincial home but we mostly stayed in Bacolod and I went to Colegio de San Agustin for both elementary and high school.

I tried to go to Manila. I took an entrance exam to La Salle, UP and Ateneo. I went in to UP and Ateneo, but the provincial man in me kicked in and so I got really scared. I'm all alone there, I don't have friends. I was going to stay with cousins here in Manila. So eventually my sister convinced me "Just go to La Salle, they have the best theatre group".

So I took a BS in Biology. I got bored after the first semester. I stayed there for a year, but it wasn't not for me. Without telling my parents — because I don't want them convincing me to move to another course that I'm not happy with — I just chose the one I really wanted, which is mass communication. I became the president of the theater group. I think I was more into the theatre group than school itself. So I was in college for six years, never graduated.

Then after that, Peque Gallaga started teaching workshops in Bacolod. I didn't go into Peque's class first, I went into Production Design with Don Escudero. And then after that I went into acting classes with Lore Reyes and eventually they asked me to teach.

Then after teaching for three years, Peque — one time, out of nowhere — called. I was staging a play in Victoria's, a sugar company. And I received a call and they said, "He's not here, he's rehearsing but we'll let him know." Peque said, "Please tell him to talk to me, I'll call him by 6pm", because there were no cellphones yet. That was around 11AM. So they told me and I went and waited for the call, and then Peque said "I lost my continuity supervisor. I'm starting a movie. *Darna* with Anjanette Abayari. Can you be the continuity supervisor?" No questions asked, I said yes! So yeah that was it. I stayed in the business. I never worked for other directors, I only worked with Peque Gallaga.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*Really?*

**Erik Matti**

We're like a cult. With Peque, if you don't accept his project, you will not be brought into the next project.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*What year was this?*

**Erik Matti**

1992? 1993?

**Danzen Katanyag**

*This was your big break?*

**Erik Matti**

Yeah! And I made a point that as soon as I arrived in Manila, Peque sat down with me and said "In five years time, where do you wanna be?" I said, "I want to be a director." He said,

## Erik Matti

“Okay, you are in the right place. You will always be on the directing team. So you’re only as good as how much you observe and listen and learn from.” And it was clear to me in my mind, I wanted to be a director even when I left Bacolod. I was leaving for Manila to work for Peque. The director Richard Somes is my nephew. His mom lives with us at home. As I was saying goodbye, I told them, “Mark my words. Before I’m 30, I’m gonna be a director.” So I left. At 27, I became a director. I was early three or four years. (*laughs*)

I have always been into movies. But I don’t know, I don’t want to make it appear like I planned this all along. I remember when I started in Manila, and I was given the continuity job, I really wanted to learn the ropes on all kinds of jobs. So I started as continuity, then eventually became second Assistant Director, and then on the side, I do music lay-ins for TV shows. I also supervised editing for Peque. Because we had this shorthand, as Peque’s AD. For the first pass of the edit, he would tell me, “You sit down and watch. Tell me if it’s good. And if you don’t think it works, bring it back to me and then show it to me”. So that was our relationship. Then I became a Production Manager, only because I wanted to know how a PM pays for all the requests. Then eventually I became an associate producer, a story writer. I wrote *Magic Temple*, there’s probably three drafts of the story that I wrote. And then we all sat down and wrote it together. Peque’s style is that we write collectively. So, for example, in *Scorpio*, Peque said, “For me, that’s your film. *Scorpio Nights 2* is not like the first film. What do you want?” I said “I want to take a crack and write the story first, but I want us to write it.” That was Peque, Lore and me. So what we’ll do, we get two desktop computers, bring it to Baguio, rent a house, stay there for four days and the challenge is, by the end of the four days, we have a rough script in hand. And then when we go back to Manila, it’s just tweaking.

## Danzen Katanyag

*That was the process for Magic Temple and Scorpio Nights?*

## Erik Matti

Yes, and the process is that we arrive early morning, around 9AM, and everyone rests. Then we bring with us a cook and the guy cooks us lunch. Then at lunchtime, we eat, and then Peque starts to discuss what kind of movie to make. *Gangland* – I co-wrote *Gangland* with them, it was also like that. And then after lunch, you would show a few films to get ideas. No story, no characters yet. Around 5 to 6PM, we drink either beer or wine. You start drinking, you start talking, and then you start saying maybe we can just focus on five characters and then dinner. After dinner, it’s time for the storyline. Either Lore writes or I write, we pass it on to Peque and then we leave him. We go to sleep, he fixes it. The next day when we wake up, and there it is, this is the story he wants. He looked at what we wrote, edited it and this is what he wants. And then from there, we start with the outline. It’s a different process too. I miss that.

I started after *Scorpio Nights*. Maybe this story will make you cry. So I was given a break by Peque for *Scorpio Nights 2*. I remember I was in Greenbelt 1 watching a movie. I just left the movie theater when I heard my beeper. We still used beepers back then. So I looked for a payphone. Peque picked up. “Where are you?” “In Greenbelt.” “Come to Quezon City. We have good news for you.” At QC, beside ABS-CBN is Lore’s house. From Makati, I ride a bus. When I arrived, it was 6, 6:30. Peque said, “Viva has offered me to do 5-million-peso movies, in many types of films. So I decided. But they asked me to do *Scorpio Nights 2* for them. Peque said, “I’m quite old for *Scorpio Nights 2*. I used up everything that I know about sex in the first one. It’s time for new blood. So they asked me

## Erik Matti

who. They have never met you but I told them I think my AD is ready to direct. So what do you say?” I said “Yes, Peqs, I’ll do it.” So I stayed there to write and when the film was shot, it went over budget!

Peque and I fought. My reputation was ruined in the whole industry. They were saying I was stubborn and didn’t listen to my producer Peque, someone who I owed a debt of gratitude to. And of course, I was ruined with Viva, but *Scorpio* was the film that saved Viva. Viva was at the brink of bankruptcy. The film was produced at P4.7 million and it earned P84 million for Viva. But since I already had a bad reputation, it was attributed to Peque and not me. Eventually, Viva, through the powers of Albert Martinez... Albert said, “I really want to do another film with Erik.” Viva discouraged him. “He’s stubborn.” Albert said, “No, he’s okay. Here’s what we should do. I’ll line-produce, give me the money. I’ll talk to Erik and I’ll make sure he doesn’t go over the budget. Viva agreed, as long as Albert paid in case I go over-budget. And then he sat me down. He said, “Okay. I’m giving you another chance. Nobody wants to work with you anymore. Do this movie, show them that you are a director who can keep a budget.”

So we set out to shoot the film for 16 days. I was so stressed that I had to keep it within the budget. *Egis* was an action film. I was so tense and tired. I had to pack up the shoot because of my ulcers, which were caused by the stress. We finished the film in 12 days! I was really making up for last time, because when you’re given a second chance... So yeah, for a time I worked with Viva and then I got tired of all these sexy films we were making. I wanted to try other projects, but since it was a cash cow... Every time I would approach Boss Vic with a horror pitch, he would ask me to just do something cheap and quick. I got tired and angry, because I was doing well, my movies made money for Viva but I was looking for something else. I wanted more out of the films that I make.

I start opening up about my plans, but somehow it felt like they were just saying yes right away. “Sure, go ahead. Make your own film outside.” So sometimes you get the feeling that they are thinking nobody would take you? Like, let him go because he will always come back to us. So I went out and immediately I called... I had met Dondon (Monteverde) once in my life. I told him, “Don, can I make one movie with you?” Dondon invited me to his house. That night, I did *Prosti*. That was it. Immediately, Mother (Lily Monteverde) was there, she called Aubrey Miles. Well it was still a sexy film (*laughs*) but I was happy that there were takers. Those were my feelings then. So we wrote the script for three weeks to a month and then I did improvisations for ten days. Because I really like ensemble casts. I think you can see it in my films. And then *Prosti* made money.

Mother Lily signed me up for *Mano Po* and *Gagamboy*. None of these were sexy films. Do you get it? She saw something more in me.

## Danzen Katanyag

*So Direk, when you made Prosti with Regal, did you start Reality Entertainment right away?*

## Erik Matti

No. After that, at *Prosti*, Dondon was handling the other projects of Regal and then one night we were on the set. Dondon said, “Direk, what are your plans in life?” You see, my problem before was that I kept my own staff. I was like Peque Gallaga. When I pitched a project the producer would say “It would be better if you did this or changed that.” At the

**Erik Matti**

end of the day, I was getting further away from my original idea, but because I really needed a job, I had to say yes and find a way to work it into the concept, right?

So I told Dondon that I want to get to a point wherein I don't have to pitch to anybody. I only think of the story I want to make, and then I can do it without having to get anybody's approval. Sort of like you want me for what I can tell you: the story. He told me, "Me too. I also want that". So when the earnings from *Prosti* came in, I asked Dondon if he would like to start a little production house. Reality Entertainment was born. We started producing.

Dondon was with me in the highs and lows of my life. He has always been there. We did commercials. Then the small money that we saved up which was 2.5 million, we produced *Pa-Siyam*. It cost us 6.5 million, but the 4 million was not settled until after the screening. All our actors worked for free. We paid them after the movie was shown. It made some money and it started the business. We bought an office unit which someone is renting now. We have an office unit in Ortigas and we moved here. We focused on advertising and struggled. We were having a hard time because our movies weren't the most popular, so we had to produce ourselves. So we thought that we needed a post-house. We needed to have lights and equipment so we can negotiate the amount of money that was coming out. If you have your own stuff, you don't need to spend for equipment rentals. We had more wiggle room.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*I am curious if genre films were chosen by you intentionally, or did you take a look at arthouse first as a director?*

**Erik Matti**

That's the weird thing, when I couldn't get a handle of how I was making films. I realized looking at my early filmography that it was really because of how confused my film language was early on. Like it was leaning towards arthouse. But I now realize most of the films that I lean towards, that I love, that I like, that I enjoy the most are half and half genre and arthouse.

I think the best example for that and the most satisfying filmmaking process that I really enjoyed and I realized I loved doing these kinds of films is when I did *On the Job 1*, which was sort of action, but it's really about how characters collide, the confrontation. Those are the things that really make me enjoy staging it or having a discourse with it. And that one, if you look at *OTJ*, it's not a through and through thriller or a political thriller but it's half and half arthouse-y. *OTJ* had a weird structure, because *OTJ* is really a two-act structure. The first act until the hospital where they try to kill Lito Pimentel, and then the last act being the unraveling. There is a strong three-act structure of the characters, but if you were to put a line on the structure of the film, it's just two acts which you show the nature of the business in the beginning and the characters involved in it, and then you see them work in that world. Then after that, the society that they affected comes unraveling. Which is a weird structure, sort of like a 1970s paranoia movie like *Three Days of the Condor*, *The Parallax View*, or even to a certain degree *The Manchurian Candidate* without, of course, the mind control. But also it has its own life. *On the Job's* structure wasn't on-the-nose.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*Direk, what is your process in storytelling with On the Job onwards? Did you change your process?*

**Erik Matti**

I've slowly transformed. For every lesson I learned in the last film, I always tell myself I don't want to make the same mistake again. Let's start with *On the Job*. The schedule then was at the mercy of the actor's schedules. And since Star Cinema was the co-producer, I had to adjust to that. As early as 2012-2011, I had wanted more time for pre-production. I always dreamed of having more time for pre-production. And when we did *On the Job* I thought, "Okay, I'm going to do this my way." I've written *Tiktik: The Aswang Chronicles* and then *On the Job* with Michiko (Yamamoto) who did the final craft of the script. I said to myself, I want to tread carefully and make sure that I do this right. And then as soon as I've locked the actors Piolo (Pascual) and Gerald (Anderson), I was told by them, "Okay, two weeks from now, you're gonna shoot." Because Gerald's window was only open to December. So you need to finish with him, so that Piolo can start shooting his other project and when Gerald is done with you, Piolo could come in on January of 2012.

It was like I had no pre-production. Imagine, I built the whole prison with Gerald and I was shooting it piecemeal. So I could only stay where I was, I couldn't walk outside because it was still being painted and fixed. Then two days later, I am done with the floors so we can do the room of Joel with the walk of Gerald. So the producers were disappointed because they didn't see it yet. I ended up shooting so much footage because I was already scared, I don't want to miss out anything for editing. I was rushing to produce the film immediately. So I was shooting so much material.

Now, big mistake, right? Good thing it worked out. So from then on, I made sure that I am not going to be forced to start shooting when I'm not ready yet.

Now, I also take a long time for post-production. I think I am lucky to have a production house where we're producing our own stuff, because I do my films without play dates, until we're just ready to finish it and we're done with it, it's okay. We're now in the transition, and I am lucky that our films have found their own audience. But if you look at it, it's not the most popular topics, but it's also not the most arthouse topics. My films are always in between. I am happy to have found that footing in the films that I make, but it's a good thing my films made it. Because honestly if you look at how the industry works, I'm supposed to be the first one to be kicked out of the business. Like, just get rid of him, he spends too much! I could do arthouse and it wouldn't be as expensive to make. With mainstream films, even if they cost more, the producer is sure he can get the money back. But my films are expensive and I make difficult movies both technically and producing-wise. It's hard to put my films together, but then the producers are never assured whether they'll get their money back. It's weird, right?

**Danzen Katanyag**

*Direk, what about dealing with international co-production and collaborations? What was your experience like? What was your mindset going in?*

**Erik Matti**

I'll start with where we were before we decided on that route. We really wanted to make movies, and we didn't have a chance yet. We said, let's go into advertising, we don't have the money to produce the films we want. We went into advertising hoping to save some money and eventually make the films that we want.

We ended up with the analysis that if we go with the tide, with the way the industry works,

**Erik Matti**

we will only do melodramas, love stories, gay comedies... is it up our alley? I said, maybe I can, I enjoy making them, but it's not our core competence. There are a lot more people in the industry who can do those things, right? So the bolder decision that we made, was let's do films where we supply the film for the local audience, but with the thinking that we are not just getting a piece of the pie in the Philippines but also to be able to sell it outside.

No one was thinking about that before. It's either you're doing local films for the local audience, or you are doing arthouse, in which even if it does get sold, the potential revenue for arthouse films for international companies was still small. We were thinking on a much bigger scale. That's where *Tiktik* came in. So with *Tiktik*, we didn't know what would sell. I was thinking it was exciting because it had a little bit of action, there were monsters, it was a horror-comedy. Maybe it could work? I remember when we were almost done with it, and it was the first time we had a green screen for the whole film. We wanted an aspect of the film that can be talked about not just locally but internationally. It's going to be the first all green screen film in the Philippines. When we finished editing it, I invited a lot of programmers, and a lot of them came here. Festival programmers and distributors, they sat down they saw it, and said wow. If there were not too many comedy parts this would sell. I asked them why? They said comedy is very local so it can't fly in international markets. That was our first lesson. Although when it came out, we were able to sell it to Germany, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. It was okay, even Japan. I think Japan picked it up, but not so much because it wasn't really a big title. So that was our first lesson. So for the next film, it was a testing ground more or less. I went and did *Rigodon* hoping that a serious adult drama with sex, bordering on arthouse—structurally and how it was written—that it could be sold internationally. We did it. It didn't sell.

Prior to *Tiktik*, I did a personal movie that marked my demarcation in doing films where I have full control over it. Where if I compromise, it's me who's compromising rather than someone else telling me to compromise. So I did this small movie with my own money. Produced it for P3.9 million. No script. So I built a script from there, cast the film and shot it, and then I didn't release it anywhere. I asked help from the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) to have a one-time screening. I only showed the film one time in my life. Of course, eventually a festival got wind of it, and I showed it there once, but generally that's it. I showed it again at the last Cinemalaya, someone recommended it, but no major release.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*What's the title?*

**Erik Matti**

*The Arrival*. So, that started my rebirth. So from there I did *Tiktik*, a small success, it made money here in the Philippines. Then I went into *Rigodon*, didn't make money here, didn't get any internationally. Nothing! And at that point I was writing *On The Job*. In *The Arrival* screening, I included a short. You know that feeling when you're writing a script and nothing is happening, and you just want something to happen to it and so I shot a 10-minute reel of *On the Job*. I asked a favor from Joel Torre, and I asked his nephew who is also a theatre actor to be the Gerald character. I shot one scene of it, so it's a 9-minute reel and I attached it to the film *Arrival*. So when I sent the screeners internationally, a lot of people said we are not interested in *The Arrival*, thank you for sending a screener, but we're interested in *OTJ*. When is that gonna be done? So there was a lot of interest in it, and then XYZ, a company based in LA who produced *The Raid*, saw the reel and said,

**Erik Matti**

"Where is this at now? We would like to help you sell it, 5 grand for it."

I was a bit dismayed, it made me cynical when it came to film festivals because a lot of time there are pitches and grant applications, etc. but they also look at it not just with the purest sense of, "Okay it's a good premise, let's get it." Because I sent it to so many grant-giving bodies. I sent it Bucheon, I sent it to Toronto and a lot of their answers to me were, "We really love it but we're not sure if this is just a Filipino movie. We are not sure anyone would make sense of a film like this coming out of your country. If this was a Hong Kong film, we would definitely give it a grant." Because we aren't famous for this genre, so they thought it's too ambitious for a Filipino movie, right?

I was disheartened, but I stayed with the project. Michiko eventually got a hold of the script and said, "No these are wrong". She fixed the characters and then eventually I thought I was ready, but I still had no producers. I sent it to actors Piolo Pascual and John Lloyd Cruz, with a note saying, "You choose your role." Good thing Piolo chose the NBI character and John Lloyd chose the prisoner character, so I brought that to Star Cinema, saying here, I already have actors attached. I thought that's how easy it would be to get it off the ground. Star Cinema said, "Well, unless we say yes to those actors for you and your film, you're not going to get them." Eventually, they allowed Piolo but with John Lloyd fresh from *One More Chance*, they didn't want to tarnish his image with a gritty character from prison. So they said no, but instead, "We will give you Gerald". So then *On the Job* made it, we sold it to 13 countries. We ended up with maybe a million dollars in sales. In North America, Canada, France... we sold it in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Indonesia.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*At that time Direk, was it the first film to do that?*

**Erik Matti**

Yes, so we ended up in Cannes. XYZ picked it up as data distributor. Even before the screening in Cannes, they did sales screenings and they sold five or six of the territories immediately. So that started it. It was my first time, and so many people were interested, calling us up asking for a meeting—CAA, ICM, William Morris, different agents. Of course, I was excited. Like here we are, we're gonna break out in the international scene. Then the remake option was bought by Universal with Mark Wahlberg attached to it and Baltasar Kormákur directing. But when you make it to Cannes, you need to be working on the next project already, so when they ask what is next for you after *On the Job*, you have something to tell them. So I was writing in my head Honor *Thy Father*, which is not an action piece, it's a drama, it's a heist/pyramid scheme movie. And then when I started, XYZ didn't want it, but I didn't care. I'm not gonna be told what to do. So I stuck with it. I said yeah, I'm ambitious.

After that, no one bought *Honor*. It's like I was being punished for being stubborn. I was asked to make an *On The Job* follow-up but I refused. *Honor* went to very few film festivals. They couldn't tell what kind of a film it is because it's totally different tonally from *On The Job*. It had a lot of meditative moments, as opposed to the way *On The Job* surges forward.

When *Buybust* went to a lot of festivals, we sold it to a few territories. *Buybust* had good sales and FDCP honored us. They were like, finally, "Erik Matti invades the international

**Erik Matti**

scene”. They were corrected because it was at an event where there were a lot of programmers. It was Maggie Lee who said it on the microphone. Erik Matti has not been discovered just now, Erik Matti was discovered as an international film director way back in 2012 with the first *On The Job*. And that’s the tragedy here in the Philippines, there is no history. No one cares about the achievements of filmmakers. We’re just regulated from the side, right? That’s another one of those filmmakers. Have they ever read a book about Mike de Leon? None. Is there a book about Ishmael Bernal? Well yes but it’s too late to the game. If it was a bit earlier, people would have watched his films even more.

So right now, I’m back to the part in terms of international. The cinemas have closed and ABS-CBN closed down. The pandemic happened and now we have moved into streamers and it was a good thing that *On the Job* got picked up by HBO, because now we are pitching in several streamers about stories no one in the Philippines would make because it’s more expensive.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*About The Missing 8 and the experience in Venice – how was it?  
That was very much celebrated.*

**Erik Matti**

For the longest time I became a jaded festival guy. Meaning, I just wanted to make films that mattered to me and I never sent out too many projects to other festivals. There are a lot of festival friends I share my films with, but I never expect to be programmed into their festivals. I was just sharing, like “Here, watch my latest film, we had fun doing it.”

It was a 4-year journey to finish the film, I just wanted it to be seen beyond the series format, in its original format – which is, I shot it as a film so I wanted it to have a festival life. I sent it to all the major festivals–Berlin, Venice, and Cannes. And then eventually of course, Venice picked it up. Venice picked it up even before they were accepting entries because they all saw it. And at first, I waited for responses from other festivals, but then I realized I wanted to say yes to Venice, because you know the feeling when they really like your movie and they want it in their festival? You want to give your film to someone who loves it the most, where it matters the most.

My first one made it to Directors Fortnight, and then this one made it to Venice. Berlin, eventually, I’ll be there. I’ve been to Toronto so I’m also okay there. With Venice, we never expected John (Arcilla) to win. We were up against huge competition, of course. I expected not just John but also Dennis Trillo to be recognized and I was happy he was there and the jury members saw him and applauded him. I told him how impressed they were and even told him they wanted two winners for Best Actor including him but Venice didn’t allow that. So as long as Dennis heard their praise, everyone’s happy. And of course, the experience of seeing *The Missing 8* for the first time on a wide screen in a major festival. It was my first time to see it on a wide screen there.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*Direk, I’m curious. How do you do the fundraising for films that are really your babies?  
Does it come from Reality Multimedia Studios only?*

**Erik Matti**

It’s a different setup. I tried the route early on with *On the Job*. I tried the route of getting grants. It takes so much time, and I have a belief as a filmmaker that if you don’t do your movie in two years, it needs to be rewritten. It needs to be reassessed from your own

**Erik Matti**

personal perspective if it still works, if it’s still where you are at this point. You get what I mean? So for example, when I did *Honor Thy Father*, to get it produced, there were concessions, of course. Reality Multimedia is also a business, we couldn’t stay afloat, we couldn’t continuously do films without making the money back. So for example with *Honor Thy Father*, we knew from the get-go that *Honor Thy Father* was not your 500 million blockbuster box-office movie. So Dondon struck a deal with me, he said, “Do *Kubot*, the follow up to *TikTik* cause that is the most commercial film. Do *Kubot* and then what we earn from it, I promise you, we will do *Honor Thy Father*.” That’s my motto: you give and take. I don’t mind because I am not a pretentious filmmaker who only loves serious films.

The other option is we put up a package with several investors. So with *On the Job*, I was ready to do it in the standard studio style of producing it, that’s why I wanted Piolo and John Lloyd. But it took Star Cinema two years to respond to it, after they read the script. So we were ready also to do the film indie style, because we really wanted to produce it, maybe at half the budget. But when Star Cinema came in, we were safe. They covered half of the budget, we covered half.

*Buybust* was also the same story. Viva Films became part of it. They knew it was expensive, and then out of the blue I received a call from Vincent. “Erik, do you still have your script for *Buybust*?” I said “Yes, it’s here.” He said, “Do you have an actor?” I said, “No, not yet.” He said, “How about Anne Curtis?” I said, “Yes! I wanted that all along.” He said, “We didn’t know then what you wanted her to do, but now she doesn’t want to do romcoms anymore. She wants a totally new project.” So I said, “Alright, let’s do it. We should set up a meeting. When?” He said, “No, she’s right next to me. Tell her about *Buybust*! Then we’ll talk about the budget.” I told Anne the story over the phone. She said, “I love it, Direk!” The next time we met, it was already the contract signing and our pictures were taken.

So I did a proof of concept with Anne Curtis and then we sent it to Netflix US, they didn’t have an Asia office yet. At that time, *On the Job* was still showing on North American Netflix. We sold it there so they knew my films. Immediately in one week, they said, “We are buying the film before production.” Pre-sale. We sold it for 1.1 million dollars with some deductions for agencies, and eventually a North American distributor also bought it. But we got the deal before shooting. Boss Vic said that’s okay, it’s like the revenue that was supposed to come from the movie theaters, we got it through pre-selling.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*That’s awesome, Direk! I’m so inspired.*

**Erik Matti**

Right? Beat them, get to know the business.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*What’s your advice or at least hope for emerging filmmakers or producers like me?*

**Erik Matti**

I think we as a country, Filipino filmmakers, the Philippines, in general, we have overflowing talent. Talented filmmakers who are trying to make their films, and we’re not worried about not getting enough substance in the films. I think where we should concentrate the most, moving forward, is in really crafting our films. Having filmmakers craft things well to set it apart from what we’re used to. More than making films, we’ve

**Erik Matti**

become used to TV sensibilities. And with TV sensibilities, it affects how we make films, mainly because their resources are also small so they're trying to shoot it fast and loose. But I really hope that up-and-coming filmmakers get into using the medium more to tell their stories, not just covering it, not just putting it on digital data. It's really about being deliberate about the kind of filmmaking you want for each particular story. Every story has a particular set. It's like having a child. No two children are the same. No two children would wear the same clothes or look exactly the same way. One might have longer or shorter hair, one might have more tattoos, one could be a goody-two-shoes. Each film has its own life and its own look. No one film should be the same.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*It really matters for you that you don't do the same thing over and over again, right?*

**Erik Matti**

Yes, yes.

**Danzen Katanyag**

*You're right. Films are like children, indeed. Thank you so much, Direk!*

*- May 11, 2022*

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Maria Danzen Katanyag**([dtskatanyag@gmail.com](mailto:dtskatanyag@gmail.com)) is a Writer, Producer and Media Entrepreneur. She co-owns and runs Digital Dreams Inc., an award-winning boutique production company based in Manila, Philippines.



# EDUARDO A. ROCHA

TBA Studios

Philippines

Interview by Marvin Lyndon Carmelo Matias

Eduardo A. Rocha (Buchi Boy Entertainment), along with his producing partner Fernando Ortigas (Tuko Film Productions) has produced several films including *Bonifacio: Ang Unang Pangulo* (The First President), *K'na The Dreamweaver*, *Tandem*, *Patintero: Ang Alamat Ni Meng Patalo* (The Legend of Meng Patalo), *Water Lemon, Iisa* (As One), *Matangtubig* (Town In A Lake) and *Gayuma* (Allure). Rocha's production joined forces with Tuko Film Productions to come up with TBA Studios, which also includes Artikulo Uno. Together, TBA Studios produced *Heneral Luna*, the highest grossing Filipino historical film of all time, spending nine weeks in the cinemas. Following the success of *Heneral Luna*, TBA Studios has produced numerous films like *Birdshot* and *Tayo Sa Huling Buwan Ng Taon* (Us At The End of the Year).

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*I'm curious about how TBA Studios started. Did it start with Heneral Luna?*

No, the brand was named after *Heneral Luna* was made. We had Fernando Ortigas who had Tuko Film Productions. I have Buchi Boy, my own production company, and we set up Artikulo Uno to do *Heneral Luna*. But while we're doing [*Heneral*] *Luna* Buchi Boy and Tuko did *K'na the Dreamweaver* and we also did *Bonifacio*. Artikulo Uno was formed so that Jerrold could be part of the mix.

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*So Artikulo Uno is a production under Jerrold Tarog?*

No, it's under TBA. And Jerrold happened to be part of it. That's the "A" in TBA –Artikulo Uno. We branded it that way, so we didn't have to call it Buchi Boy, and Artikulo Uno. But *Heneral Luna* started it all.

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*So during the development and packaging of Heneral Luna, there are three productions—the Tuko, Buchi Boy, and Artikulo Uno?*

Yeah. Actually only Artikulo Uno appears [in the credits]. But when we list the distribution, we put TBA.

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*How did Heneral Luna begin its journey? Like from the development stage.*

In 1996, ten years after the EDSA People Power Revolution, I was noticing how we were backsliding as a nation. So I wrote the first outline of *Heneral Luna*, the first draft of the script with my co-author Henry Francia. That was in 1997, and it took that long [until 2015] for the film to be completed.

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*Wow. It's a long journey.*

Yeah. It was almost made three times, but people were afraid of the content. Once we were already a few days into pre-production and we were getting the team together. They were from Canada, but they backed out last minute, they were afraid of the implications. It's all research, but they said to change the name. So we changed the name. But the script was losing its star already, the way I was looking at it. When I recommended it, they bought the rights of the book. The film was based on a book, though not all of it because there were a lot of books about this topic. Then I myself said, really I don't think this is going to work out. So I put that script in the *baul* (chest).

Later Leo Martinez called and said that the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) was having a competition on the topic of heroes. So I submitted it, and it won third place. Then Jerrold Tarog heard about it, and that's how we got together and did the rewrites.

Marvin Lyndon

Carmelo

Eduardo Rocha

*So what year was this competition from the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP)?*

If I'm not mistaken, it must have been in 2011 or 2012. In the end, a friend of my late son

**Eduardo Rocha** came to visit. He asked, “Do you have any projects?” so I gave him Luna’s script and he took it to his uncle. The uncle, Fernando Ortigas, happened to be a friend of mine, though I didn’t know he was interested in doing films. So he liked it. He said, “Let’s do it. Let’s give it the treatment it deserves, the dignity it merits, the budget it merits.” So the stars aligned after 18 years.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *From my perspective as an audience member, I saw everything as just success. Can you share the risks that you foresaw back then while developing or packaging the film?*

**Eduardo Rocha** I warned Fernando that in most cases, historical films don’t make money. I said, “You’re investing a lot of money there. Are you sure you want to go that far?” He said, “Yes, I want to do something. If that’s the only form it’s going to be, I want it to be that.” So we gave the filmmakers everything they needed to make it work.

But of course, when the film opened, nobody was putting us in the morning slots. We had very few theaters, and we were losing theaters as the days went by. Only after the second week did things pick up. The theaters started asking us back, because word of mouth was a strong online marketing boost. We were trying to get people involved. We went to schools, you know. And immediately Fernando said, “I want a 50% discount for all students from day one.” I said, “That’s too much.” He said, “No, I want them to see this movie.” So we made that our policy, 50% off for students, and that touched our hearts because students were posting fully paid tickets on the internet saying we want the producers to make money.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *So partly the intention was non-profit? I mean in a way?*

**Eduardo Rocha** Put it this way, we managed our expectations. We were praying for a breakthrough.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *So apart from marketing to schools, what other ways did you promote the film?*

**Eduardo Rocha** Social media. We built a strong social media campaign. There were memes, and then the audience was putting out music memes, tying them in with ours. And so it crossed over to into pop culture. I’m very proud that it happened. I spent so many years wanting to do this.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *Do you mind sharing the financing and revenue data for Heneral Luna?*

**Eduardo Rocha** Well, the revenue was very strong. If you want to talk about the gross, we thought it was around 260 million pesos, but it was actually over 300. I don’t know the exact figure. Regarding the cost of the production, if you include setting up the office it was about 70 million. In terms of actual money into the film, I’d say 60 to 65.

We’re also getting money from TV and streaming services. It was the second Filipino movie to make it to Netflix, after our film *Birdshot*. *Birdshot* was the first.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *Is Birdshot a production under TBA Studios, or did you only handle distribution?*

**Eduardo Rocha** No, it’s under TBA Studios. We financed the whole thing.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *That film is so nice. I’m a fan of Mikhail Red.*

**Eduardo Rocha** Thank you. Yeah, I saw a lot of promise in the boy.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *So after the success of Heneral Luna, more opportunities have opened up to you, based on what I saw. Would you say your later works are the fruits of your success with Heneral Luna?*

**Eduardo Rocha** Well, we’ve had our hits and misses. But we’re proud of all our work. Put it this way, they’re still earning money, so you can’t base everything on theatrical returns. You have to look at all the other revenue streams, right?

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *You’re thinking about the long term.*

**Eduardo Rocha** Yeah. When you’re that old, you know that adage that if you make five movies, you hope one hit covers the rest. It wasn’t that bad for us. But we did quite well.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *So, any thoughts on the long tail strategy of film distribution?*

**Eduardo Rocha** Well, you try keep it alive. If you have the makings of a classic... Movies like *Heneral Luna* have a lot of demand. And despite having it on our YouTube channel, which is monetizing our films as well, there’s still demand for it on other platforms. And it has continued earning up to this date. I don’t know how much we’ve earned, but it’s quite a lot actually.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *In general, what are the challenges encountered by TBA Studios regarding the bigger picture of production, or the film industry?*

**Eduardo Rocha** The big thing was the perception of what people will see in theaters. Let’s say I hadn’t found the actor of *Heneral Luna*, people wouldn’t have been open to our product. But even then they doubted it, and so it started losing theaters right away until word of mouth hit and the campaign worked.

But the bigger threat to Filipino films are foreign films. When I distributed films before in the early seventies, I brought in films like the first *Murder on the Orient Express*, I brought in *Death Wish*, *Apocalypse Now*, etc. They made money, but we were trembling. Every time a local film would open, I would tremble. Now, it’s the other way around. Foreign films have taken over our psyche. We have lost our identity as Filipino filmgoers.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo** *Yeah, like a colonial mentality.*

**Eduardo Rocha** I don’t know if you can call it colonial mentality, because before in the seventies and eighties, we were releasing much more than foreign films. It’s a millennial mentality, I’d say. It’s all the comic books, the Marvel Universe. We could use a lot of other types of foreign films to come into this country so we could learn the art of watching. Of not being spoon fed. I mean, the biggest bomb you can have is Korea. There is a country where you have to develop films... The film audience there, and their film identity. That’s the model

**Eduardo Rocha** we should have. That country, South Korea, and the support they give their filmmakers.

I think we have world class filmmakers who are not supported financially, or by the government. We have the talent, we have the equipment here. They just need support. And people should stop being lazy, watching films on streaming. They should go to the theaters to experience the beautiful interaction between screaming audiences.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *Any other thoughts on the Filipino audience right now?*

Well, how can I judge that now, we haven't had audiences in theaters for two years. But I think right now they're getting lazy. And then they either watch on their computer, or on their phone. The theater is really where it's meant to be shown. It's a collective experience, it's almost like making love versus masturbation, you know?

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *So it's better to experience the film in the theater.*

Yes, yes. Don't you see it that way too?

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *Yeah, but the theaters are really hurting, including the multiplexes...*

That's right. But, you know, America is picking up again bit by bit. You see they had *West Side Story* that wasn't doing well, but the theaters kept it running because they wanted to give people an option from other movies like *Spider-Man*. They kept it on.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *So what are some other challenges facing the Philippine film industry?*

Well, first of all, poor quality projection, and sound.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *You mean in the theaters?*

Yeah, you know, you spend so much money to get just the right color and look for the film, and then they give you a very low wattage. Except, I'm proud to say it's not that way in Cinema 76.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *Do you think the Philippine film industry is getting left behind in some way?*

Yes. We're getting left behind because we have been pigeonholed in a lot of film festivals in what I call poverty pornography. It started with *Insiang*. And they never evolved from that mentality. It's as if Europeans are saying, "Oh, look, I want you to see this." What? You see how lucky we are. And yet our smaller movie, *K'na The Dreamweaver*, has been making waves, and it's still being shown and requested in a lot of countries. That's a cultural film.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *So internationally, they like poverty porn.*

Well, that's what they expect from the Philippines. So we have to change that perception. There are other films you can watch that show some social reality, but it doesn't necessarily have to be shot in the slums, you know? Once we did a movie and somebody

**Eduardo Rocha** told us, "No, the streets are too clean. Shoot it in the dirty part of town." Why?

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *It's like the dilemma when shooting the Bourne Legacy film.*

Well, the *Bourne Legacy* film, they came here, they felt we have a messy city, let's face it. Bullshit, it's the truth. That we made money out of it. But that's the look they wanted. They got it, they didn't have to do production design because it's there. But I just thought, "Oh come on. Open your eyes."

I was involved in the movie *Noriega: God's Favorite* with Bob Hoskins, that they shot in the Philippines, standing in for Panama. It was directed by Roger Spottiswoode, who directed a couple of the Bond films. It didn't show the Philippines that badly. But the setting was Panama, not the Philippines.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *How do you find the next generation of filmmakers?*

I think we're in a third golden age right now. The first one was back then. The second was in the seventies. I think it began back then, that's why we named the theaters Cinema 76. That's an era where experimental cinema also existed, in the late seventies, early eighties. That was the second golden age. This is the third. We're entering a third golden age.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *At TBA Studios, what are you attempting to do to uplift the film industry?*

We don't speak down to our audience, and a big part of our films, even in our rom-coms, is really about the human condition. Look at *I'm Drunk I Love You*. It's all about the human condition, as well as *Dito at Doon* and *Write About Love*. It goes to the soul of writing. The soul of a writer.

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo**  
**Eduardo Rocha** *So any thoughts, advice, or inspirational remarks for Asian producers?*

Well, for Asian producers, let's show how varied we are as countries, as nations. And don't pigeonhole yourself into one aspect of your country's cinema, cover all aspects. And be true to your nature, because human nature with the human condition can be a shared culture. Therefore it doesn't matter. There's happy. There's sad. There's mad, there's glad. Everyone shares those emotions... And be true. Be true to your work.

- May 10, 2022

2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Marvin Lyndon Carmelo (letscreate@chimeravisions.com)**, commonly called Marv, received a Bachelor of Arts in Digital Filmmaking. Before graduating, he was already working with artists from the US and UK. He has worked with a number of production houses on projects ranging from short films, digital ads, feature films, TVCs and documentary films. Aside from the filmmaking industry, he also worked for the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design with the internationally-acclaimed curator Joselina Cruz. His experiences in MCAD Manila lent him more extensive knowledge on film and video. In April 2019, he established his production company Chimera Visions. It had a lot of clients in the past two years that focused on advertising, films, and creative documentaries. It is gradually establishing itself across the Philippines, and the globe.

In 2021, Marv was selected by the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) to participate in the Philippines' first delegation to the 28th Sheffield Doc|Fest in the UK. In July 2021, Marv participated in two other international opportunities. He was selected as one of the 35 mentees for Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival's Fantastic Film School. He was also selected by the FDCP to be part of its Philippine Delegation to the Marché Du Film Cannes Producers Network 2021. In August 2021, FDCP enlisted him in the Locarno Pro Online.



# PAUL SORIANO

Director / Screenwriter / Producer

Philippines

Interview by Andrei Karoly Hernandez (Amaya Han)

Paul Soriano is an award-winning film director, scriptwriter, and producer who was born in Los Angeles, California. He moved to the Philippines and started his career directing concerts, music videos and TV commercials, then he moved on to creating short films and full length feature films. Today he is one of the Philippines' top TV commercial directors and has directed numerous commercials for companies such as Unilever, Unilab, Kraft, Smart Communications, Globe Telecommunications, Enchanted Kingdom, Rebisco, Honda, Chevrolet, Western Union, and Pizza Hut.

Over the span of his 17-year career, he has directed 11 feature films and has produced 19 feature films under his own production company TEN17P Films Inc. which encompasses its subsidiary companies: Black Cap Pictures Inc. (advertising unit), TinCan Films Inc. (mainstream unit), The Post Office Inc. (post-production and animation unit), and Toni Gonzaga Studio (YouTube content unit). He has won numerous awards including Best Picture and Best Director in film festivals in the Philippines and abroad, and has made several box office independent and co-production films.

## Amaya Han

*There was an interview where you mentioned how you got to play around with Video8 with your brothers – so with that said, please tell us what inspired you to enter into the world of films, or how and when did you come to be part of this industry?*

## Paul Soriano

I think I was kind of born into the industry. If you look at my family history, my grandfather was an actor *Nestor Devilla*<sup>1</sup>, kind of like a 50s, 60s matinee idol. He had a love team or a dancing partner, *Nida Blanca*<sup>2</sup>. So, they were Nida-Nestor, he was kind of like the Fred Astaire of the Philippines.

So that was my grandfather, and of course my father *Jeric Soriano*<sup>3</sup> was a filmmaker, a director as well. So as I grew up, production was normal to me, that was my playground. That was my after-school activity, and because my dad was a filmmaker we had access to Video8 cameras, even Super8 film cameras. So I got to play with these toys growing up. Of course back then in the late 80s, early 90s cameras were really hard to get, it's not like today where everybody has a camera.

I had fun with it just telling stories, and as I grew up, the influence of my grandfather and my father were pretty strong. And eventually, organically, naturally I just fell into becoming a filmmaker myself, not just directing or writing but also producing and helping out filmmakers in general. So that was my childhood, and honestly, I'm still in my childhood.

## Amaya Han

*Aside from your grandfather and your father, who are your filmmaking influences? Or let's say, whenever you make films, who is someone you look up to?*

## Paul Soriano

Well, growing up I watched a lot of Steven Spielberg's films. So, *E.T.*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were films I watched repeatedly. I just found it so interesting because it allowed you to really exercise your imagination. Up to this day it's not really proven that there is extraterrestrial life out there. But your imagination can prove that it does exist.

Then as I got more interested in cinema, I started falling in love with the works of François Truffaut and then the French cinema. From Korean cinema I got to watch a lot of Kim Ki-duk, and of course, Bong Joon Ho. From the Philippines, I was able to watch a handful of films from Lav Diaz and Brillante Mendoza, and some of the more contemporary, legendary filmmakers also: Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal. I think one of my favorite films of all time is *Himala*<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Nestor De Villa (born Gines Francisco Soriano) was a popular Filipino actor frequently cast in musical films from the 1950s until the early 2000s. De Villa remained active in films until his death of complications arising from hepatobiliary cancer on February 21, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Nida Blanca (born Dorothy Guinto Jones) was a popular Filipina actress. After a successful acting career in films during the 1950s, many of which were with actor Nestor De Villa, she gained further prominence in television. Blanca starred in over 163 films and 14 television shows during her 50-year career and was named one of the 15 Best Actresses of All Time by YES! Magazine (Philippines).

<sup>3</sup> Jeric Soriano is the son of Nestor De Villa, and the father of Paul Soriano. He was a popular commercial and film director in the late 80s and early 90s. J. Soriano is still an active commercial director to date.

<sup>4</sup> Himala is a 1982 film by Filipino director Ishmael Bernal.

**Paul Soriano**

But I continue to search for different kinds of influences. Just because I admire and respect those filmmakers, it doesn't mean that new filmmakers couldn't inspire me, like *Hannah Espia*<sup>5</sup>, *Gian Abrahan*<sup>6</sup>. They're younger than me, but I'm inspired by their passion and style of storytelling.

**Amaya Han**

*You mentioned that you like the concept of extraterrestrial beings. Do you have any plans of making films with those?*

**Paul Soriano**

Oh, definitely. I think when I finally get the opportunity to tackle science fiction, I want to be ready for it. I do have some scripts and stories that I've written that deal with extraterrestrial life. It's just that, with science fiction you have to be very patient to execute it correctly. The scriptwriting and development stages are the cheapest part in terms of the budget, but to produce it, it's quite expensive. And obviously, we're still in the middle of a pandemic.

So some of the big concepts will have to wait a couple years for the industry to recover, at least here in the Philippines. But yeah, I'm very excited to hopefully one day tackle science fiction.

**Amaya Han**

*We'll get into the pandemic later. Were there any interesting anecdotes from your filmmaking experience over the years, from when you first directed and produced your films up to now?*

**Paul Soriano**

You kind of lose your sanity when you're making films. Because if you don't, you probably gave up, right? You need to be little crazy to tell stories and to execute it the way you want. So I guess I have hundreds of stories, but something that happens to me in every film is that I kind of become the story, I become that moment.

It's how you know you're getting into the moment – into the method kind of filmmaking where you go crazy. You become a little unorthodox because you've got your eye on the story – that's your mission, you want tell your story. And the hardest part for me is actually when the film is done, how to get out of that moment. How to regress back to reality and prepare yourself for another film.

**Amaya Han**

*You're like a method director...*

**Paul Soriano**

Well, I don't intend to, I guess you'll have to ask the people who work with me. But I guess any filmmaker can relate to the idea that you have to be intense. You cannot take it lightly, you have to be really be into it. Most filmmakers I know share that passion and I think that's why there's lot of debate, discourse, arguments... you know friction, heat. If you don't fight on the set – constructive fighting, fighting for the best intentions of the story – then I don't think you're creating anything worthwhile. I like to challenge the people I work with, my actors, my cinematographer, my editor. I want to debate. I want people to tell me I'm wrong. I want people to tell me something's not correct, and why. Then maybe we could create something much more beautiful than what I imagined.

I believe in team playing also. The director is the captain of the ship, as they say, but you're only as good as the people on that ship with you, and you also have to find ways to

**Paul Soriano**

motivate them. To share your passion and lead them to the vision you have. Because as a filmmaker, not many people can see what you see. Right?

That's the hardest part, communicating the idea with the hundreds of people that you work with. And at the same time, getting those people to support you. Even if you're so intense and so crazy, so unpredictable. These people are there to help you tell your story. So, find a good team, that's what I always say. When you get into a film, that'll be at least a year of marriage, right? You want to choose the right people, and that only comes with experience, because I've chosen a lot of the wrong people, you know (*laughs*).

**Amaya Han**

*So, in general, what would you say are the toughest aspects of making a film? Both pre-pandemic and now during the pandemic.*

**Paul Soriano**

I guess from the producer's perspective, it's the cost, right? Pre-pandemic was already challenging in terms of budget, then when you entered the pandemic, you have additional costs because of lock-in, accommodations, testing, COVID safety protocols. As a producer and as a director, you may think you have enough, but in the end it's never enough. So it's always finding that creative way to tell your story given the budget that you have.

Of course, with the pandemic, health and safety was always the priority. But that was also costly, because if somebody got COVID, you would have to shut down your shoot. Paying for accommodations for 40 to 50 people is not cheap either, with meals, transportation and testing. But thankfully, we were able to shoot five films during the pandemic.

The positive side of pandemic shooting was the idea of lock-in. I think that's really the best way to shoot a film, where everybody is locked-in, not just the production team, but also your actors. We check-in, tell the story and when we're done, we all check-out. No other projects to distract you from the story you're trying to tell. So I think that was the positive. The pandemic also proved that you don't have to be hundreds of people on set. You can actually find 20 to 30 people, or even 10 to 20, to multitask and come together to tell the story.

**Amaya Han**

*I'm curious, what were the film set "bubbles" like? As a director or producer, have interactions with the actors and crew changed?*

**Paul Soriano**

There is the social distancing, but you can't help yourself if you want to be very hands-on. I mean, when you want to motivate your actors, you cannot be a meter apart. You want to be in their ear, in their face, right? So I won't sit here and lie and say I followed every protocol.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Espia is a Filipina director best known for her 2013 film *Transit* which was produced by Paul Soriano.

<sup>6</sup> Giancarlo Abrahan is a Filipino director, screenwriter, and poet. His 2014 full-length debut film *Dagitab (Sparks)*, which was produced by Paul Soriano, won several awards on its World Premiere at the Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival (Philippines).

**Paul Soriano**

But (*laughs*) thank God there were COVID police on set who would always remind us: wear masks, social distance. Because in the moment you don't think anymore of the pandemic. You think about the story you're telling. So yeah, there were too many times I had to go back to my room or stage because I forgot my mask. It's tough, because before the pandemic we hardly wore masks. I guess in Japan or Korea they were somewhat used to wearing masks already. But in the Philippines, face masks were only worn maybe in hospitals (*laughs*).

**Amaya Han**

*Where do you see the film industry in the Philippines going in the next three years?*

**Paul Soriano**

I hope cinemas are open. I guess that's the first priority for me, because you know, I'm in love with cinema. That's why I became a filmmaker. It's because of that whole experience – it's a spiritual, emotional, physical experience when you go into a cinema.

Also to go back to the mid-level bigger budgets, because at least for my company, our post-recovery plans are to shoot lower budget films. What's really saving our industry right now are the streaming services, and streamers don't really pay what you could make in the cinema. For cinema, the sky was the limit, right? With streamers, it's pretty much one and done. Sometimes it's not even enough to break even.

So we just have to find a formula. We need passionate filmmakers willing to shoot on low budgets only to keep the industry moving, to get the jobs rolling, and the stories produced. Because I feel that in three years, we'll go back to the normal budgets, and hopefully bigger budgets, Hopefully cinemas will be thriving again. And that every producer, every production company will start feeling those benefits.

**Amaya Han**

*If you don't mind, can you share your formula for low-budget films?*

**Paul Soriano**

Well, for me the formula for low budget films is finding filmmakers who can be passionate about it. It's just that sacrifice. Let's support the industry by finding a way to do low budget films. The technology is there. You see iPhone films; you see films shot on DSLRs. Cinemas were our main source of revenue, probably 80% of what producers would make. And I respect and commend any producer that's producing films right now. Imagine you sell clothes and all the malls are closed. That happened, right? So they pivoted to online. That's kind of what we're doing now. We had to pivot to online and what's that for us? Streaming.

So, the formula for me for low budget films is finding a filmmaker that can believe and be story first. Story-driven, not budget-driven.

**Amaya Han**

*You mentioned that you are looking for filmmakers who are story-driven, and I've always known that you are the type of producer to invest in stories. So, do you consider yourself to be a risky investor?*

**Paul Soriano**

I guess it's just gut-driven. If I love a story, I listen to my intuition a lot. It gets me into trouble. Because (*laughs*) you have your finance people telling you to make movies that pay the bills, right? But a lot of the films I like tend to be... maybe indies would be a better word to describe them.

**Paul Soriano**

I've had to learn to also produce so-called mainstream films, guilty pleasure films. Fun good old rom-coms, comedies, dramas. To sustain a business, you need that. If you're successful in that, you can do your art films, indie films here and there, your passion projects. But from my perspective, you can't make passion projects all your life. Unless there's a private investor willing to do that for you. But that doesn't happen a lot.

If you look at our filmography, at least in the last three years, we've adopted that formula. We do two mainstream films, and if they're successful, we're allowed to do a passion project. We have to earn our passion projects. Not like before, where I was kind of stubborn and spoiled. It was like... passion project, passion project, passion project... I realized it doesn't work that way.

**Amaya Han**

*Since you mentioned that you are looking for filmmakers, how should a director or a screenwriter pitch to you?*

**Paul Soriano**

At least for now, for the next two years, they have to think of ideas and concepts that can be executed with a low budget. Let's get creative, you know. There are so many success stories out there. Internationally, you have *The Blair Witch Project* or *Paranormal Activity* which have very, very low budgets compared to other Western films. We need concepts that we can execute for a low budget but still be entertaining, something that an audience will still watch. So yeah, we've been having pitches the last few days, and a lot of filmmakers support this idea now. I appreciate when filmmakers can also understand the producers' sentiments. Hopefully, in the second half of the year, we'll be producing a couple more.

**Amaya Han**

*From your perspective, how do you think the Philippine film industry is changing? Do you think it's growing, or not?*

**Paul Soriano**

I think, for me, what can be improved is the development side of things. Just because you have access to technology doesn't mean you know how to tell a story. I'm still trying to learn and study. We should always have that mindset to never stop learning and always improve. Develop, develop, develop.

Let's not get caught up in the fast-food type of filmmaking. Because that's what the world is now, right? They want everything fast. For me, if we can just put that premium on development, script development, talent development, even production development – learning the craft, directing, writing, editing.

**Amaya Han**

*In terms of development, for TEN17P<sup>7</sup> or Black Cap Pictures<sup>8</sup> or TinCan<sup>9</sup> – or in general, the whole company – what have you done to create that ideal setting?*

<sup>7</sup> TEN17P Films Inc. is a boutique film company based in the Philippines that is owned by Paul Soriano.

<sup>8</sup> Black Cap Pictures Inc. is a subsidiary unit of TEN17P Films Inc. which is the company's advertising and commercial unit.

<sup>9</sup> TinCan Films Inc. is a subsidiary unit of TEN17P Films Inc. which is the company's mainstream film production unit. This is co-owned by Paul Soriano and his famous wife, multimedia star Celestine "Toni" Gonzaga-Soriano.

**Paul Soriano**

We have probably 10 scripts right now that we're currently developing. We have a script development fund in our company, so you pitch to us, and if we like your concept, the first stage is we'll develop the script. It doesn't guarantee it'll go into production, because for me, to greenlight a film to go into production you need a great script. I don't greenlight a film on a pitch, right? Unless you're like, Bong Joon Ho or something (*laughs*).

If we go into script development, we look at the storyline, and give them our feedback, until the storyline is approved by us. Of course, with the filmmaker, we don't tell them all the work they should do. We just try to give our comments. We may go into the sequence treatment outline, but it depends on what the filmmaker wants to do. Sometimes they want to go straight to the script. And then we are there every step of the way. After about two or three drafts of the script, if we think it looks right, we stop there. If it's good, we tell the filmmaker, okay, let's wait for financing, for actors.

Right now we have about ten scripts that we're developing, and we support the filmmakers by giving them funding, at least for that stage. There are three scripts that I personally feel are ready, but in filmmaking, the universe also has to agree with what you want to do. Sometimes it's the other film on the shelf that gets the green light, because the investors like it.

**Amaya Han**

*From a producer's perspective, what do you think makes for a good script – that is ready for a green light?*

**Paul Soriano**

Well for me, the obvious thing is, if I can't put it down. With all the streamers now it's hard to watch a film in one sitting, because there's the pause button, right? But a film should be watched in its entirety. When you go to a cinema, you can't pause it.

So when I read a script, and I can't put it down, the pages are turning... That for me is a good script. Even if it's the first draft. When I start writing on a script, that means you've hooked me already. Because I want to give you feedback and comments.

I think the other one is if I can't get it out of my mind. If I read something and go to sleep, and then the next day I forget about it, then maybe it's not really a good script. But if I wake up the next day and am still thinking about it... That's how it was with *Transit*<sup>10</sup> with Hannah [Espia]. She pitched it to me. She only had a couple of short films under her belt, and she was young. But her concept – I couldn't get it out of my mind. Every day it was bothering me. I felt like I needed to release this concept, so I could see it on the big screen.

So those are the things I look for. And of course, I rely a lot on my team, because sometimes they see things that I don't.

**Amaya Han**

*When did you realize that filmmaking is your way of telling stories, and not literature or something else?*

**Paul Soriano**

I guess I was never very fond of reality. I can't look at your imagination, right? I can't look at Bianca [Trinidad]<sup>11</sup>'s imagination, or Hannah [Espia]'s imagination – they need to show it to me, and usually it's through a camera. So the camera was my outlet into sharing my imagination with people. When I look back at my filmography, it shows me what kind of person I was at that particular time. When I watch *Thelma*<sup>12</sup> from ten, eleven years ago

**Paul Soriano**

– it's like: oh, I was that person. Or when I did *Kid Kulafu*<sup>13</sup>, or *Siargao*<sup>14</sup>. I think that's one of the best things about filmmaking – that you have little imaginations that you can leave in the world, and have strangers speak into it.

**Amaya Han**

*This is an off-question, I just want to ask it. I read in an article that you really wanted to be a professional golfer? Are there any golfing principles that you apply to filmmaking?*

**Paul Soriano**

Oh, 100%! Golfing and filmmaking are kind of complementary. Before you hit a golf shot, you need to visualize it. You don't go up to a shot and think: it doesn't matter wherever this goes. Most of the time, it doesn't go where I want it to go. But when it does, it's like magic. Imagine you set up your golf ball, right? You see it, and think, I've got to go around that tree, and I want it to land right on the green next to the hole, and at least I'd have another putt for birdie. And then when you pull it off, oh, my god... In golf there is a saying, you can hit a hundred bad shots, but if you hit one good shot, it will make you come back for more. I think the same is true with films, right? You could produce ten films, and maybe eight are bad, but the two will keep you doing more.

What I also like about golf is, it allows you to listen to your thoughts. It's a very quiet sport where you can just be alone. One with nature, one with the universe, and it's also my creative place. I mean, you can also be competitive. It gives you that competitive drive to always be better. And golf is a sport – talk to Tiger Woods – that you'll never master. It's the same with filmmaking for me.

I don't think any filmmaker would call themselves a master. It's their audience that does, right? It's the ultimate compliment, but I don't think you'll ever hear a filmmaker say: yes, I am a master of film. Or if one did, at least for me personally, I'd think: okay... But in filmmaking, and for life in general, you can't really master anything. I think the reason you keep trying to be better is because you think you can, but you never will, right?

**Amaya Han**

*If you could go back in time and talk to yourself when you first directed (and produced) a film, what advice would you give yourself?*

**Paul Soriano**

Listen. To listen more. Because when you're young, you're stubborn, selfish. And it's a good thing too, right? You know what you want. But it would just be: listen more. Because that's what I'm doing a lot, now that I'm 40 years old, I'm listening more. And that allows

<sup>10</sup> *Transit* is a 2013 Filipino independent drama film written and directed by Hannah Espia. It was Espia's full-length debut film which was mostly shot in Israel. It was selected as the Philippine entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards, but it was not nominated.

<sup>11</sup> Bianca Trinidad is an Associate-turned-Supervising Producer of TEN17P Films Inc. and all its subsidiary units since 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Thelma* is 2011 Filipino inspiration family and sports drama film, directed and produced by Paul Soriano and released by Star Cinema (Philippines) and Paramount Pictures (international).

<sup>13</sup> *Kid Kulafu* is a 2015 Filipino biographical sports drama film based on the life of world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao, directed and produced by Paul Soriano, and co-produced and released by Star Cinema.

<sup>14</sup> *Siargao* is a 2017 Filipino surf romance film directed by Paul Soriano and distributed by Solar Pictures. It sold about Php 80 million (1.6 million USD) during the official run of the 2017 Metro Manila Film Festival making it the third most successful film in the film festival in terms of box office gross.

**Paul Soriano** you to talk more, to tell more. I guess I have no regrets, but just to listen more. Still, I wouldn't change anything about my past.

**Amaya Han** *You mentioned earlier that you shot a film during a pandemic, and it felt like a thesis film because you had 10 or 20 staff and crew...*

**Paul Soriano** Yeah, student film-ish.

**Amaya Han** *What's an important lesson that you can share with aspiring or emerging filmmakers who are making films as of this pandemic?*

**Paul Soriano** Yeah, the film I shot during the pandemic is a very, very personal film. It's called *Real Life Fiction*<sup>15</sup>. When I look back at it, actually, it saved me from the pandemic. You know how everybody was going through their own emotional, spiritual, and mental challenges at that time.

It's a very personal film in the sense that, if you just look at the title, it means the thin line between what's real and what's not. It's what I do for a living, right? So hopefully, that little exercise I did, a certain amount of people can relate to it. It's not for everyone. But I'm 100% proud of the film. I was able to execute something during a pandemic the way I wanted to, and it evolved and got better. I had great collaborators. Hopefully we'll get to show it soon, because I would love for it to come out in a cinema. We're just waiting, being patient. You know, we shot it almost two years ago.

**Amaya Han** *How was Real Life Fiction developed then? Was it something you made because of the pandemic, or it was developed before the pandemic?*

**Paul Soriano** I love writing in notebooks – it's kind of my thing. I have a lot of notebooks at home that I keep. Usually, it's just a collection of memories. So I call it *Real Life Fiction* – kind of like my observations of the industry that I grew up in. Working with actors, trying to tell stories, working with character development... I was always fascinated with the actor. I think it's probably one of the most challenging, most demanding professions in the world. They're some of the most talented people, and some of the most misunderstood. So I wanted to create something from my perspective – what I thought of them, because I just have so much respect for them. I call it an observation of the last 17 years of being in the industry.

**Amaya Han** *So, I have last two questions. Technically they're related, but I'll ask them separately. Can you share an overview of your career's strategy from now onwards? And what type of projects do you see yourself involved in as a director-producer in the future?*

**Paul Soriano** Well, my filmography is kind of all over the place, right? But it's just who I was at that particular moment. I've just listened to my gut, to my intuition at that particular time. That's how *Thelma* was born. That's how *Kid Kulafu* was born... or *Siagao... Dukot*<sup>16</sup>. I mean, everything... *First Love*<sup>17</sup>. So I guess moving forward, I have matured in the sense that I want to play with imagination a little bit more. Meaning, in the past I was trying to emulate so much the realities of life.

Maybe it's time to just tell stories that deal with fiction – actual fiction. Like, this can't

**Paul Soriano** happen in real life, but it's freaking entertaining. It's awesome. And so those are the kinds of films that I like now – out of this world. With a twist that you would never expect. You know, gripping... So hopefully I'm going to do some films, at least in my 40s, that will be more entertaining in the aspect of: this would never happen in real life. But imagine if it did? So yeah, the whole 'What if?'

**Amaya Han** *You mentioned earlier that you were developing ten scripts, right?*

**Paul Soriano** Ten scripts of different filmmakers. I probably have three scripts as director-writer, but there are seven or eight films from other filmmakers.

**Amaya Han** *I see. Please tell us about your upcoming projects that are already green-lit, and are in the financing stage or in pre-production.*

**Paul Soriano** Well, the one that I really want to do next is called *The Fisher*. It's about a fisherman and his family who live in a fishing village, and it deals with a lot of mythology, a lot of 'what if's. It's also kind of timeless, in essence – you don't know if it's taking place today, or two decades ago. I was inspired by a lot of older films in that regard.

I also have another science fiction one with the working title *Channel 37*<sup>18</sup>. In the film, based on research, *Channel 37* is the channel for extraterrestrial activity. Those are the two that I'm really passionate about, at least at this particular moment. Because both of them deal a lot with the fictional aspects of life. Hopefully they'll happen soon, because I'll be honest, those are a little bit on the mid-to-big scale – they're not low-budget.

So what I'm also trying to do now is to write or develop something that's low budget, for

<sup>10</sup> Transit is a 2013 Filipino independent drama film written and directed by Hannah Espia. It was Espia's full-length debut film which was mostly shot in Israel. It was selected as the Philippine entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards, but it was not nominated.

<sup>11</sup> Bianca Trinidad is an Associate-turned-Supervising Producer of TEN17P Films Inc. and all its subsidiary units since 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Thelma is 2011 Filipino inspiration family and sports drama film, directed and produced by Paul Soriano and released by Star Cinema (Philippines) and Paramount Pictures (international).

<sup>13</sup> Kid Kulafu is a 2015 Filipino biographical sports drama film based on the life of world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao, directed and produced by Paul Soriano, and co-produced and released by Star Cinema.

<sup>14</sup> Siargao is a 2017 Filipino surf romance film directed by Paul Soriano and distributed by Solar Pictures. It sold about Php 80 million (1.6 million USD) during the official run of the 2017 Metro Manila Film Festival making it the third most successful film in the film festival in term of box office gross.

<sup>15</sup> Real Life Fiction is Paul Soriano's unreleased film. It is co-produced by TEN17P Films Inc. and Viva Films.

<sup>16</sup> Dukot (Captured) is a 2016 Filipino suspense thriller film directed by Paul Soriano. It is executive produced by ABS-CBN Film Productions Inc. and distributed by Star Cinema.

<sup>17</sup> First Love is a 2018 Filipino drama-romance film written, directed, and produced by Paul Soriano, co-produced by ABS-CBN Film Productions Inc. and Viva Films, and distributed by Star Cinema. It was filmed in Vancouver, Canada, making it Soriano's first directorial film shot abroad.

<sup>18</sup> Channel 37 is an intentionally unused ultra-high frequency (UHF) television broadcasting channel by countries in most of ITU region 2 such as the United States, Canada, Mexico and Brazil. The frequency range allocated to this channel is important for radio astronomy, so all broadcasting is prohibited within a window of frequencies centered typically on 611 MHz. Similar reservations exist in portions of the Eurasian and Asian regions, although the channel numbering varies.

**Paul Soriano**

me personally. Something that I can maybe shoot with a Video8 camera, or a DSLR. I'll call my good production friends, maybe a couple of actors and be like: hey, guys, let's go camping and shoot a film. That concept, I'm still wrestling with what it will be. I do have ideas, though.

**Amaya Han**

*Okay, the last question. You mentioned your ideas about how we could hopefully improve the industry. That's for the pillars like you, the big producers, but what can you say to young, aspiring and emerging filmmakers who want to pursue this career? And do you have any advice to them about how they can make the industry better?*

**Paul Soriano**

I'll just say, don't give up. It used to be: be passionate, right? But that's not enough anymore. Because it can also burn out. So, I say: don't give up. It's not easy. Have this mentality that from day one, the industry wants you to fail. Because it's very competitive too. I mean, people may be friendly here and there. But you know that person wants to make a better film than you. So if you really want to be in the film industry, don't give up. It's not a nine to five job. You don't get holidays off, weekends off. I guess the best way to describe a filmmaker, in essence, is that you're on-call all your life. *(laughs)* But there's beauty in it. Especially if you get through it, there's beauty in it also.

So I'd tell young filmmakers, or filmmakers that are struggling now, or even veteran filmmakers who can't seem to get anything made: don't give up. And that will prove to everyone that you're passionate about what you're doing. Again, at the end of the day, the film industry wants you to fail. So it's your job to prove them wrong. How? By not giving up – by performing.

**Amaya Han**

*Okay, so that ends our interview.*

**Paul Soriano**

Thank you, Amaya!

**Amaya Han**

*Okay, thank you direk<sup>19</sup>!*

*- April 28, 2022*

<sup>19</sup> "Direk" is a Filipino slang for the word "Director". It is commonly used to address directors, cinematographers, and assistant directors in the Philippines.

**by Andrei Karoly Hernandez (Amaya Han)** is a pioneering Cum Laude alumna of the University of San Carlos - Fine Arts in Cinema Program (2015); alumna of the Bing Lao Found Story Screenwriting Workshop (2016); alumna of the Sundance Institute (Sundance Collab) Film Producing Course (2021); selected participant for the Film Development Council of the Philippines - Make the Cut Workshop (2016); and a Philippine representative for the ASEAN-ROK Film Leaders Incubator Program (2015), FLY in Higashikawa Program (2016), Platform Busan at the Busan International Film Festival (2017), Kyoto Filmmakers Lab Masters Session (2022), and Event Safety Alliance Summit (2022).

Recently, Amaya was selected as a participant for both the SHOTS: Basic Occupational Safety and Health Training for Audiovisual Companies (2021) and the Training of Trainers Program (2022) by the Film Development Council of the Philippines and Occupational Safety and Health Center of the Philippines; as a participant for the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership RESET Program (2021); and for the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs of the U.S. Embassy - American Spaces Philippines. She is currently taking up her Master in Business Administration at the University of Mindanao. Also, she studied International Film Producing at the Busan Asian Film School International Film Business Academy.



# VINCENT QUEK

Head of Anticipate Pictures  
Singapore

Interview by Jonathan Tang

Vincent Quek is founder and head of Anticipate Pictures, one of the only independent arthouse film distribution companies in Singapore. Since its inception in 2016, Anticipate Pictures has distributed award winning narrative films like *A Hero*, *The Worst Person in the World*, *Memoria*, *Pig* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, as well as documentaries such as *Gunda*, *The Reason I Jump*, *Caught in the Net* and *The Kingmaker*.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Could you begin by introducing yourself?*

**Vincent Quek**

My name is Vincent. I am the founder and head of the company Anticipate Pictures. It is a film distribution company that is based in Singapore that releases, theatrically, independent films, European arthouse films, as well as feature documentaries. We've been around since September 2016, and we have acquired about 55 films so far in our last five years. Every year we aim to release between eight to ten films for meaningful theatrical and other types of distribution in our territory, and recently also in Thailand.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Could you tell us why you started Anticipate Pictures and how did you go about doing so?*

**Vincent Quek**

I started Anticipate Pictures after I left my last job as an arts administrator for a nonprofit. At that time, I noticed that there was a gap in the types of films that were being offered in the cinemas of Singapore. Primarily, I noticed that films from Europe, as well as smaller English language films from America were not being seen as much. We mostly had locally made content that is usually Mandarin-based or, of course, studio and tentpole blockbusters. I had some background, as a university student when I was in the US, working for distribution companies such as IFC films as well as Universal Pictures. So really being on both sides of the industry, I saw how an independent distributor runs their acquisitions department as well as how a big studio picks up films with the mindset for global distribution. I think with these skill sets I acquired during my university internships, I felt I had some knowledge, maybe even more than most people in Singapore, to try something like this. So I put together a business plan and, in about six to eight months, I raised some seed funding and off to the races we went.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You mentioned that you focus on independent films – arthouse and documentaries. And I suspect this because you do have some sort of affinity with them. Is that right?*

**Vincent Quek**

Yes, absolutely. I always felt like films that were not very commercial had always a bit more of an edge and “bite”. They have a bit more “bite” about issues that were not being probed or explored as much. Things like sexuality, gender, political issues. I am invested in that. I really think that movies are a good vehicle for us to explore facets of the human condition that we don't really get to see in more escapist commercial fare. So that's why I wanted to bring in those types of films.

**Jonathan Tang**

*What are the biggest hurdles and issues you've faced bringing these films into Singapore? You did mention that a lot of them have political stances and other more controversial issues that they would focus on.*

**Vincent Quek**

When I first started my business, the thing I really underestimated was how hard it is to find screen space for them. At the time of 2016, we had an independent cinema called The Projector, which started in December 2014. And they had started to come around and were starting to break even, a little bit, by the time I started in 2016. So I thought, okay – I think the appetite for independent films is there; or at least enough to sustain one space in the whole country, even though it's a small country. Bolstered by that fact, I went into my business. I realized that acquiring and sourcing for movies isn't really the hard part. It was trying to find screen space for them. For some reason, the Projector was quite reluctant to give my films space in their cinema, which is kind of odd, but for reasons

**Vincent Quek**

that I can't really state on the record.

So in the first couple of years, when we brought in films, we had to four wall them. Basically, we had to rent a space and then sell tickets. It was really financially taxing because we were not only a distribution company that brings in movies, we were also, somewhat, trying to exhibit these films as well – that's not really what a distribution company does. So the seed funding was rapidly depleting. And at the same time, it's not as if I didn't try working with the multiplexes like Golden Village, Cathay and Shaw. But what I quickly realized is that they all had their own distribution arms within their organizations. And if you didn't co-distribute the movie that you bought with them, which would entail agreeing to some pretty draconian terms not in your favor, you will probably not be able to access their screens as well.

So here I was, unable to put the movies that I had brought in these multiplexes, and also not really getting the space that I thought I could get, which is the Projector in the first couple of years of my operations. So I had to rent out a space at the Artshouse, which is a nonprofit organization that is pretty central, but no one really knows that there's a screening room there. A lot of my resources went to raising awareness about this new place, as well as for my movies that I was bringing it. So this is really burning the candle at both ends. And thankfully, towards the second half of my year in operation, the Projector finally came around and they have been great partners ever since and I could stop four walling.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Did the Projector, itself, have its own distribution arm?  
How else would it have gotten its own films?*

**Vincent Quek**

Yeah, they used to have a person working there that brought in or decided what movies to show on their screens. And I guess he didn't want my films to be shown on his screens. So after he left, I was able to speak directly to the programmers. The programmers were thankfully more understanding about the movies that I was bringing in. They saw the films fit their credo and their vision for the cinema, so they decided to allow my movies to be screened. Recently, I think they started to distribute movies. I noticed that they started to buy very small titles so that the acquisition cost isn't as high for them. Like *Writing With Fire*, for example, is purely a Projector acquisition which is doing very well and got nominated for the best documentary last year. So good for them – small films like that can be easily acquired.

**Jonathan Tang**

*My next question would be more about the seed funding that is available in Singapore for these types of endeavors. It seems, from my experience, that the consumer base is not very big and I think that has a lot of implications on funding and resources.*

**Vincent Quek**

Just to be upfront, the seed funding I found was from a very sympathetic family friend. So, maybe, my investor definitely did read through my business plan and he thought, okay there's a shot there. But I think, maybe, he was more motivated because of our personal relations. But that goes for a lot of new start-ups. Usually, you find your seed funding through a personal relation or a family friend or something – that was how I found my seed funding.

But you're absolutely right in saying that a lot of grants and public money that are being

**Vincent Quek**

put towards things like cultural endeavors don't necessarily go towards – actually I can be very upfront about this – they go to companies that put a lot of their public spend on local jobs or local investments. So unless your locally based company provides jobs to the labor force here, you'll probably not be able to access the funding. My distribution company is ostensibly buying foreign movies. So the money's actually flowing out of Singapore. There was no public funding, whatsoever, that was going towards my company. I think the Projector managed to access some public funds through some festival or one-off program that focuses on some Singapore film showcase. But otherwise they also don't get funding from the government apart from the pandemic relief efforts.

So for those who buy or invest in things outside of Singapore, we don't get that kind of seed funding. And also because we are not exactly innovating or disrupting a space or anything like that. We are actually working very much within the model of traditional distribution companies. So we're not raising interest from VCs or hedge funds that are looking to invest in something that will be a unicorn – we are just not going to be on their radar. That was all that was available, which is whatever you could scrounge from friends or family... whoever you can find that is willing to listen to your business plan.

**Jonathan Tang**

*What is the competition that you have from other companies in the arthouse distribution system? Other than Projector, are there any more companies that do it, and do you feel that you wish you had stronger competitors out there to provide a bit more of an incentive to push yourself? In economic systems, competition is generally viewed as a positive thing, from a macro perspective, for efficiency and...*

**Vincent Quek**

I know you're an economics major, so maybe it's good to try to speak a bit about that. I think nobody really wants competition, right? If you are in a space and you are the monopoly in that space – that's probably a good thing for you...

**Jonathan Tang**

*I guess from the consumer standpoint.*

**Vincent Quek**

I mean, I'm a business owner, so let me quickly give you what my macro view of the industry, having worked in it for a while, is. We are an oligopoly. We are only very few players. Like I mentioned, the cinema chains have their own individual distribution outfits within their organizations that acquire and they are really my biggest competitors. They're the ones that generate the most revenue, obviously, from their exhibition business and so they can funnel that into their distribution arms to acquire content. The bigger the content, the better, of course.

Let me give you some perspective: an Annapurna or A24 film will be probably out of my reach, most of the time, because the production value on those films is way higher. So they expect a large investment from distributors around the world who wish to distribute their product. That's not within my reach. Not that I don't try, but obviously we all passively know that the prices I can offer are too low for that kind of product. So you've got them and they are tied to an exhibition chain, and then you've got the independents that are like me but they have been in the industry for a long time and they have a lot of pull with the exhibitors, so they can get spaces within the major exhibition chains. But that's only because they have built up a solid reputation for the products that they bring in.

**Vincent Quek**

Clover and Encore: these are the two companies that come to mind, and they specialize in Pan-Asian products. Your Korean films, your Japanese films, your big Chinese blockbusters, they have the network and connections to source these movies and they usually buy them pretty fast before the cinema distribution outfits can do it, at prices that I can't afford. They've built up this reputation. They also specialize in things like animation, which is doing really well and it has a solid fan base. So as you can tell, these are the films that do bring in the crowds and draw a lot of money, and that's why they are able to access the exhibitors, the cinema exhibition chains.

Further down the pecking order are people like me who do films that are not usually Pan-Asian – of course we do have a few Chinese independent films sneaking in here and there as well as some Korean or Japanese films, but they are usually a lot smaller in scale and the subjects are a lot more niche. So we found a very sweet spot with LGBTQ content, which a lot of major players don't touch. But they've started to realize that LGBTQ content – actually if you do it right – you can get it quite affordably, and market it and sell pretty well even though, as you can imagine, the classification system restricts LGBTQ content to audiences 18 and above and, most times, 21 and above. But if you do it right, you can still get a bit of a return on your investment. We've managed to, sort of, get into that space a little bit more than our competitors have, so I'm quite happy about that. And also things like feature documentaries, which I think is kind of a blind spot for many people – we've had some decent successes with the documentaries we bring in.

On my level of scale, of other one-man shows, there are people like Lighthouse Pictures who brought *Drive My Car* to Singapore last year and he's been around for more than a couple of decades by now, but maybe only distributes one to five films a year or less. It was in this space that I felt it was the easiest to access. And it's also that I'm more passionate about these kind of films as well – so it sort of played into my strategy when I first started.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You mentioned about LGBTQ content and doing it right. What do you mean exactly by doing this right? Given all the censorship and restrictions that the government has on it.*

**Vincent Quek**

I think growing up, I've managed to stream a lot of LGBTQ content illegally. It's not too hard these days, over the Internet, to find a movie or something you've heard of. It was something that I was very curious about, that I sought out a bit more purposefully than I did with other kinds of cinema. That interest hasn't gone away over the years. And when I started the company, I was really also trying to see what we can do, especially since censorship guidelines have relaxed over the years. Previously, there was more of a hoopla over *The Kids are All Right*, that Julianne Moore, Mia Wasikowska's independent film from Sundance that was restricted to one space, the Picture House in 2009, I believe, when the film came out. It was rated 21 and people were like, "Oh my God, it's about gays... you're normalizing lesbian moms!" So we've come a long way since then.

Now I can release a very straight up, classy film starring Academy Award winners Colin Firth and Stanley Tucci and no one bats an eyelid. Sure, it's R21 but it's playing in three to four screens in a major cineplex in Singapore and no one is writing to the Straits Times (newspaper) saying, "Why the hell are we putting a huge, very gay drama on screen?" And I can get away with putting on things like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, totally uncut, for

**Vincent Quek**

example. Why I say it's a sweet spot is because when we release these films, even on the limited screens that we have (versus what our competitors can release on), they pack in the numbers and on a per-session average we see about three quarter full showtimes or sold out showtimes, especially in the first week and even during the second week and beyond of release. We find that sometimes limiting the number of sessions to very specific days of the week can result in higher returns. And it's also less taxing on our exhibitor partners. So this is the kind of nice balance that we've managed to strike with some of these titles with our exhibition partners.

**Jonathan Tang**

*I do feel that I have had to go for a certain screening because of the limited screenings...*

**Vincent Quek**

So sorry about that!

**Jonathan Tang**

*No, no! I think it was a good thing. I think movie going should be an event and it really helped reinforce that idea, and everyone puts more effort into it.*

**Vincent Quek**

Yeah, it does! But of course, we haven't talked about the elephant in the room which is streaming. I digress a little here because the condition of theatrical screenings is that you are limited to a certain time or certain day to attend them. And if it's one of these limited release films – the ones that I do – you're limited to certain days, or a day and a certain time, and of course with streaming, it's on demand – you can watch any time, any day, any device you have and that kind of disincentivises potential consumers from taking the time out to see a particular film in the cinema, especially if they have reasonable belief that the film will come to streaming very soon. So that's not helping us a lot – streaming – in that sense.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You kind of read my mind because the next question was going to be on streaming and disruptive platforms. Besides competing with them for customers who are deciding whether they should watch films at home or in theaters, there are also probably other areas where it has affected your business too, both positively and negatively. With the boom in these platforms, they have probably encouraged a lot more content to be made that you could potentially distribute when they are not picked up by them. And also, you mentioned that documentaries have been a good area for you and your company and, personally, I've seen a lot more documentaries being made because people think that they're more easily picked up, and I think that gives people more hope. And that, in turn, gets reinvested into the different industries by just the generation of this content.*

**Vincent Quek**

You know who benefits the most from this?

**Jonathan Tang**

*The streaming platforms?*

**Vincent Quek**

No, no, I mean the streaming platforms stand to gain from the content that they are investing in, but the people, or the businesses, that stand to gain the most through this are producers like you! Producers, anywhere in the world, honestly, they are finding that it's easier to get an idea made or commissioned or produced by a streaming platform because the streamers are very hungry for content. You may not know this because you're currently based in the US, but HBOMax is going to be entering Singapore and Southeast Asia soon. And they already set up a headquarters and are hiring mercilessly,

**Vincent Quek**

ruthlessly for the last couple of years, and they are putting a lot of money to commissioning productions so that they can create content to attract new customers away from Netflix. And that decline for Netflix is already happening in the US. In my humble opinion, Singapore and the rest of the world are maybe about five years behind what the US is experiencing. So if I project five years and beyond in advance, you're going to see a glut of streaming platforms that are going to be in the Singapore space or the Southeast Asian space. And people are going to be really deciding hard, because they may have relinquished their cable subscription to Starhub or Singtel for now, but then they're quickly realizing that they're replacing it with things like Netflix, HBOMax, Disney Plus and all these other streaming platforms.

But let's bring it back to distribution because that's really the meat of what you are asking me. So yes, documentaries are increasingly being normalized and often seen on streaming platforms. But then the problem becomes that now everybody thinks that documentary is streaming content – it's not that they wanted to think this way – but just because more and more people are exposed to documentaries through a streaming platform first and not other platforms; not in a theatre or on TV or something which is like your typical Discovery Channel programme. For the kind of documentaries that we do, the kind that criticize or as a social critique or profile of some kind of event, or if it's released in the feature film format style, these documentaries are increasingly being seen by consumers on streaming platforms. And that's where they want to see them, and they maybe won't want to go out to see them on the big screen when, for example, someone like me decides to bring them in. So that is some of the trouble with my job. At least more people are watching documentary now, which is, I guess, a good thing for everybody, including documentary filmmakers. But for a distributor that's wanting to spotlight documentary because they think that it has some kind of quality that should be seen on the big screen, it's getting increasingly harder to get people who are not predisposed to seeing a documentary on the big screen to actually do that. So that's kind of where my thoughts are. It's great that the proliferation of documentaries is being widely accepted by consumers everywhere. But when we really talk about the platforms where they are being consumed at, it's getting harder and harder to get them to come back to the big screen.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Who do you deal with when you approach people to distribute their films?*

**Vincent Quek**

I deal with sales agents.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Do you feel that there is any pushback from the producer or director's side for the the films to be exhibited in theatrical form as opposed to streaming platforms? Because I would assume that a lot of these people still do want their films to be exhibited in the proper form that they envisioned it to be in, right?*

**Vincent Quek**

Vincent Quek: Yeah, it does. But increasingly producers will go where the money is. So if a streamer is going to throw money at you and your project to make it a reality, then the question becomes: why would you not want to take that? Right? Because the illusion is that they give you access to all these people around the globe, through their platform, and they are really throwing money at you and you are guaranteed to make a return on it, plus some for yourself to sustain you for the next project. Why not take it? And it's going

**Vincent Quek**

to be harder and harder to say no to these offers.

Let's put it this way. You're a producer with an idea that you want to make into a movie, a fictional narrative. So if you want to do a narrative feature film, you are probably trying to get a PFD deal, right? So you want to get a typical production, financing, distribution (PFD) deal with a big studio or somebody that's going to put money into your project and, thus, making you a producer for hire.

So you don't really have creative control over your project, because the studio is completely funding this. But you, in essence, are definitely going to get the film made and seen around the world. And then now there are streamers, right? Streamers who are acting exactly like studios are. They're completely coming in as well and and throwing money at you to make the film for them. But essentially, they also giving you producers a PFD deal where they produce, finance and distribute for you, and that's it. Case closed; in terms of financing it. And I guess the same goes for a documentary deal as well.

So I guess the only pushback from a producer to say no to any of these deals is when they think that this project, in the hands of this streaming studio, might get diluted to be more commercial, and they want to have creative control over the final product. So they reject these deals and they will go through this process where they, hopefully, work with sales agents. So these are the people that I mentioned I work with. A sales agent would probably give you more creative control. Of course, they have some investment in it, but not total investment. So they can prompt you to, maybe, have this direction for the story if you want to make it more sellable to people in Germany or France, which are big players in the pre-sales market. So then the producer will have to go back to the writer to amend the story. But you have more creative control in this scenario if you refuse the PFD deal that a studio or a streamer would give you.

And let's say you get the movie made and it does really well and it goes to an A-list festival and gets hype. And then, like what happened to *Coda*, which is a remake of a French film, it premiered at Sundance and Apple snapped it up for 25 million dollars. And in this particular case, *Coda* was actually pre-sold before they got into Sundance. And from now on I'm talking about the film that won the best picture, the remake, *Coda* was already pre-sold to a few territories, but because of the Apple deal, the streamer which had a lot of money, the sales agent and the producers decided to go back to the pre-sales buyers, which I understand some of them were from Germany and Japan and so on, and said, "Look, we know you committed to this film already, but because Apple is giving us all this money, we need to buy back these rights", which is kind of the dream scenario, a little bit I guess, but not so much for distributors like me, maybe, who have pre-bought *Coda*. So in some circumstances, the producer and sales agent will buy back the rights and in others, they'll try to find a way to work with the streamer to keep those pre-sales agreements with the overseas buyers, like myself, in place and that they would take the rest of the world or something. So this is more common if a studio picks it up so that it also gives an incentive for people to pre-buy from outside the US. But let's go back to *Coda*. Apple buys *Coda* for 25 million, so everybody gets their pre-sales rights back; hopefully the people who pre-bought it make some money on top of that for committing early and then they get a streamer release and then they got all the money for the award season campaigns and now they have won Best Picture. So good for everybody involved.

**Vincent Quek**

For many films, that's not going to be the case. They are going to premiere at some festival somewhere, hopefully, and maybe somebody somewhere in the world will buy it. So a distribution company like myself would buy for a region or their territory, and they commit to releasing it theatrically and beyond. So that's kind of where our industry is at right now. So it's definitely a boom for producers who want to get projects made. Especially if you are located in an emerging region like Singapore or Southeast Asia or Asia in general, where companies like HBOMax and Disney Plus have yet to fully exploit or fully enter. Because what happens is that all these streamers are really throwing money into commissioning content that is local enough to attract the local audience. So that's great for producers and people who are in the production sector of our industry. It's not so great for people like me and exhibitors who have already been here doing the work that we try to do, but of course it's not on the scale of what a streamer can afford.

For us, we are finding that the sources of our movies are getting squeezed – the numbers of things that are on offer to us. It's just increasingly difficult. So this is the kind of trend that we see until, of course, Netflix starts to, and I'm picking on Netflix just because in the recent earnings call, they've reviewed that they've lost many subscribers which I think was going to happen eventually. You can't have unlimited growth in subscribers. There's going to be some turnover. So that's going to happen in our markets, at some point, in the near distant future. My hunch is that in about five to ten years time, we will also face the same phenomenon as what's happening in the US right now, where people are like, "I'm already spending 50 bucks every month on entertainment; that's kind of like my cable subscription previously, but now replacing it with streaming content, and then what now? So people are going to start deciding to subscribe to Netflix this month but cancel everything else and will cancel Netflix next month and will do Disney Plus and then cancel that and so on. They will rotate, right? So then that will limit the kind of investment that will be put on commissioning productions as well. But of course, I'm talking about five to ten years later, it's not going to be an issue in the near future for producers like yourself.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You do paint a very bleak picture of the...*

**Vincent Quek**

Only for my sector!

**Jonathan Tang**

*How do you intend to approach dealing with this, and what do you have to say to other distributors as well in the region? Like what do you think they are going to do?*

**Vincent Quek**

I think if you are going to start now, it's too late. It's too late to start now as a traditional theatrical distributor, servicing your own market just because the odds are stacked against you. Especially if you want to make money on this. First of all, we don't make money. We are barely scraping by. In fact, I had to furlough myself during COVID and I am still on furlough, sort of. Which means I'm not paying myself any money for doing Anticipate. So I have to find other sources of income. If you're in the business of making money, don't come into distribution. I'm not saying it to deny or discourage competition in my sector, but if you just look at it from a very objective point of view, if you really don't have the passion for the products that you're going to be releasing, then you probably don't want to be in this sector.

For people who are already in this sector, I think what we offer is something that

**Vincent Quek**

streaming platforms think they offer, but actually don't really offer. What I'm trying to get at, and I hate this word because it's overused these days but I have to use it because there's no other way to encapsulate this, is we provide some form of curation. Because of the nature and the size of our company, we cannot commission like 50 productions a year or something. In fact, like I mentioned, we do six to ten films theatrically a year and that's kind of an optimistic target now, which was not that impossible when we first started in 2016. But now, we see that we can only buy films that are at a really attractive price point and maybe we can only do four to eight films a year or something like that.

We have to really make brutal choices with these eight films that we bring in. It has to be the right alchemy of all factors. From our experience of releasing the kinds of films that we do, is there enough of an audience that will come out to this? Could I potentially find revenue sources for this film beyond the theatrical release? I mean, we talked about theatrical all the time, but we are also looking at things like non-theatrical releases. So non-profit screenings, embassy screenings, film festival screenings – these bring in money. Could I find a partner for these kind of screenings for the eight films I want to bring in? Are they even available for Singapore? So it has to be the right constellation of factors that align, and I hope to find eight films like these every year and, on top of that, hopefully get them before my existing competitors that can afford more and have access to more screens. I think these are the challenges facing my industry.

Why do I say streamers give you an illusion of curation is because, at the heart of it, they are tech companies. And tech companies, they run on A.I. and they're very good at what they do. In fact, the A.I. informs the productions that they commission, who is watching what and for how long. But, there is a certain dilution of quality that comes with commissioning so much of the same kind of films. How many reality dating shows can we have on every single platform? How many variations of baking shows or food cultural shows where the host travels to many countries and talks about the food culture there? How many of these kinds of films can we have, and if you can have as many as that, you are probably not going to see something that really pushes the envelope. Hopefully they do – but it's going to compete for the audience's attention and space and time on their platforms. So we hope – well I personally hope – that I'm able to ride out to the point where consumers realize that, actually, small companies do provide a lot of value too. Small companies like Anticipate, by virtue of the small number of titles, actually do highlight and champion films that push the envelope and do speak to you directly, in a fashion that has more quality, more value for money, value for time than if I just binge watched a reasonably safe option on a streaming platform. I'm hoping that with time, audiences will also become more sophisticated; that they can discern for themselves when they want to consume escapist entertainment, and not just on streaming platforms, but also escapist blockbuster entertainment in cinemas, and when they might want to put themselves a little bit out of their comfort zones and explore a topic, or an aspect of culture or society elsewhere in the world, that they would otherwise not have access to and learn something from it. But of course, humans are creatures of habit and the comfort zone is where most people want to turn to, especially if you spend a long, hard day working outside and the last thing you want to do is watch a three hour Turkish drama that espouses on what life is about. So I completely get if you want to just watch a 90 minute rom-com. That's where I see distribution companies like mine headed towards.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You talked about the change that the consumers are going to have to undergo. Do you feel that this is going to happen organically, or is there going to have to be some kind of intervention, culturally or educationally, in order to make that happen? And also, do you foresee the distribution companies having to, let's say, merge in the future in order to be able to compete with these larger platforms for content?*

**Vincent Quek**

That's an interesting proposition. A merger between independent companies and distributors... Unless you have a library of titles that is so attractive that it interests the larger player to want to come in and acquire it, I guess? But you are talking about a merger – so between equally sized companies... I don't know. That's something to explore. I guess I haven't reached out to my rivals or anything to pool our resources together.

**Jonathan Tang**

*It's a little more like a consolidation of smaller players in order to face Goliath.*

**Vincent Quek**

I feel like we are all, at some level, a bit disillusioned. So maybe that conversation needs to happen sooner than later. From my perspective right now, as of April 29, 2022, those conversations are not happening yet, and also maybe this is because too many cooks may spoil the broth. In a way, we see ourselves as cooks trying to serve... Should small restaurants merge to have a chain of gourmet restaurants? It's kind of hard, I guess. You would lose something if these small restaurants merge.

**Jonathan Tang**

*I guess the comparison would be the restaurants merging in order to get the produce that they need. But then the result would be having to serve the same thing altogether at the same time.*

**Vincent Quek**

I think that's hard. It's probably not going to happen at this level of industry. But your first question... you had a good point. Can you repeat that question?

**Jonathan Tang**

*You mentioned that the hope is that the consumers change...*

**Vincent Quek**

Oh yes. So obviously we always hope for state intervention because in Singapore we are so used to see handouts, and we are used to hoping that someone will bail us out or Temasek [Holdings – an government investment company] will come in and be like, “Okay, the cultural industries have the potential for somehow scaling up and employing thousands of people like Lazada or Grab.” But no, that's not going to happen soon, right? So I can't tell you how many times, not just people from my sector of the industry, but producers and independent distributors have harangued NAC (National Arts Council) and IMDA (Infocomm Media Development Authority) to really focus their efforts on film literacy. And really what we are looking for is media literacy, because it's such an essential skill to discern things like fake news even, because if you are able to read how a piece of media content is presented and how editing can give you a biased opinion or how certain selections of clips can get you thinking a certain way.

I wish there was a greater emphasis on media literacy by state actors, but that has not yet happened on a larger scale. The odds are stacked against us. But I think that education amongst consumers is happening organically. I'm 30 this year and I have friends who are in their twenties – ten years younger than me – and they are all keen and wanting to explore outside their comfort zone. Basically they are the target audience for my kinds of

**Vincent Quek**

content. And I'm sure that two decades after me, the people in their teens and young adulthood who are finishing JC [Junior College], Polytechnic, ITE and are starting to go into university, they are also wanting to explore, and are no longer content with just taking whatever is presented in their local cineplex or on streaming platforms like Netflix.

But what we realize is, generationally, this change has happened very slowly. And coming back to my own business, we see a tapering off of consumers for my kinds of films after they reach the age of 30, 35 because I think at that age, people start to want their BTOs [Build to Order: Government Housing Flats], they have their full-time jobs and they want to start families and those come with responsibilities and less time to think about self-actualization. Maslow's hierarchy of needs! So there's less time to self-actualize, everybody's finances and disposable income is geared more towards things like food; feeding their families, paying for rent, paying for BTOs, buying diapers for kids. So they disappear from our consumer base.

And in other countries, in Western democracies or people with established cultural institutions, the trend is that these consumers do come back in their fifties and sixties when their kids go off to college and they have time again. And hopefully they're a little bit more well endowed in terms of their financial spend. And they are willing to try things like cultural institutions. But then movies or films don't fall in that spot under cultural entertainment. Things like opera, the ballet, dance, drama, theatre, these are traditional art forms, fine arts, obviously visual artists, so these are things that people put their money towards when they're older so they become patrons. But films always have sort of, for better or worse, crossed between being a commercial product as well as an artistic product, and more and more so, not seen as an artistic product, even in established Western cultural capitals. And in Singapore, you look at your parents' generation. They've had culture stamped out of them because they've lived through that era, where in the seventies, basically arts and culture was stamped out in the pursuit of nation building. So they don't have that mindset, going into their fifties and sixties, seventies, and they are increasingly very well-endowed and they are doing things like traveling and all that, but they are not exactly becoming patrons, they're not being converted to the arts and even less so for the movies.

So we don't have that going for us. Right now, we are servicing a demographic that is, realistically, between 18 to 35 and hoping that when they reach 50 years old and beyond, after two decades, they will return. But will Anticipate Pictures and others like me remain after 20 years because we also have to care for our Maslow's hierarchy of needs: the first two tiers. Will we be around to service them or will there be other players? I don't know and I hope that I'll be able to ride it out.

**Jonathan Tang**

*What you said about our parents's generation and having the culture stamped out of them... could you elaborate a bit more on that? Because I do feel that – and I have not been able to pinpoint what it is – it is a source of a lot of resentment on my end, and I feel like a lot of other people share the same sentiments.*

**Vincent Quek**

Let's put it this way. I don't blame my parents, who are in their sixties now, for taking a lesser view of culture, because if you remember our Singapore history... In 1965, after independence, Singapore had a very robust production industry run generally by the

**Vincent Quek**

Shaw brothers and the Lok family who ran Cathay, and also had production facilities. There was a very robust production industry in the 1950s coming up to the 1960s that rivalled Hong Kong's. We no longer have that in Singapore because our founding fathers, they essentially decided they were going to make it so hard that production industries would close down, in the 1970s. So the Shaw Studios, which is still located at Jalan Ampas, is just a property now and no longer a movie stage. It closed down and moved its production facilities to Hong Kong and Malaysia. They essentially stopped all efforts alongside some very draconian policies to restrict and clamp down on artistic expression. All the way from the late 60s to the early 90s.

So there were nearly zero movies made during this time, and it's because the entire nation or the productive classes of Singapore were being galvanized towards becoming a labor manufacturing hub. That was the thing to help make money for Singapore's growth, for our GDP. The ruling party decided to refocus all efforts towards the STEM industries... not even STEM yet because that was later in the nineties. But the labor industries: the fabrication of chips, and all kinds of labor intensive things, so we can attract investors to come to Singapore and make money for us. We became a STEM hub and we want to be a bio hub and so on and so forth, all the way till today.

So the arts and movies were never the focus. Our parents were in their twenties and thirties during the 1970s, and they were all taught that the only way to progress in life is to get a steady paycheck, and what other way to do that but to find yourself a nice company, stay in it, rise up and eventually become some kind of middle manager, or hopefully c-suite, if you can imagine that, and then ride it out until you have a very nice pension plan in the end, when pensions were still given out. When they had kids, they enculturated their kids to think that way too.

But with subsequent decades, the new parents started to let go of this mindset a little bit. So now we have very young families, we have kids these days or people going to college now who were born into the 2000s – and those who became parents in the 2000s obviously had a very different mindset from parents who gave birth in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. The struggle against the people who have never been taught to see culture as an important thing to pursue in their lives, that is always going to be there for people like us who are older. But that struggle is, hopefully, going to be a lot easier with subsequent generations of Singaporeans or Singapore residents.

**Jonathan Tang**

*You mentioned the boom in production in Singapore in the 60s. Do you think that it has recovered since then, or how far short is it, and do you see it improving if it hasn't?*

**Vincent Quek**

It has recovered. But there is now a polarization of content being made in Singapore. So you have the ultra mainstream – the ones that are made for every Chinese New Year and every other holiday by one or two big companies that service that market because it's very commercial and they make commercial products, and then you have the very arthouse. You have films that are meant to be seen in A-list festivals. And we have succeeded in getting those kind of titles into festivals, but when they are brought back to Singapore, they only play in three or four screens. And then after a week they become one screen, just one print.

**Vincent Quek**

So there is no in-between. There is no picture that has successfully crossed over to either sector of the commercial side and the more artistically inclined side. And this is very worrying because we can't grow the industry at two ends. We can only grow the industry if the middle is being serviced as well. And not enough of this "middle content" or this crossover product of commercial and arthouse sensibilities – we are not seeing enough of that. I think the closest we've come to this is *The Apprentice* by Boo Junfeng, which has very artistic sensibilities but has crossed over a little bit, successfully. And, of course, films like *Ilo Ilo* because the premise and the situation is very familiar to a lot of Singaporeans so that's why it managed to cross over a little bit audience-wise. But in terms of the amount of content that is being made in this region, we're not really seeing a lot of that. And that's very worrying.

**Jonathan Tang**

*What would you like to see happen?  
Do you think it's a consumer issue or a creative issue?*

**Vincent Quek**

Some of my producer friends, at least the ones I respect, they managed to tread that line between making commercial products, in order to keep themselves afloat, as well as saying no to some commercial projects, so they have the time, bandwidth and energy to take on some artistic projects that fulfill their creative side. I think for producers, I hope that's the trajectory you go. But obviously don't say no to a project that will pay your bills. But then also don't say no to projects that satisfy you artistically and creatively, that fulfill you that way, because then you're just playing the very commercial side of the game. And yeah, you can you make a lot of money. And I guess that's the aim for material needs but just don't lose sight of why you got into this in the first place. And for distributors like me, we just do the same thing. Sometimes we have to say yes to a more commercial product that maybe would pay our bills for a bit. We also have to say yes to films that don't pay our bills, but we think is good to represent on our lineup because we are proud to have that voice of that filmmaker on our slate of films to release in Singapore. I think we all can do better in treading that middle ground instead of being staunchly on one end of the industry.

**Jonathan Tang**

*It's a combination of being pragmatic but also optimistic at the same time. What do you think is being done that you are hopeful about, or what do you look forward to seeing in the near future? Or what are you currently anticipating... you see what I did there... in a good way? What are you looking forward to?*

**Vincent Quek**

Looking forward to audiences being bored of Netflix. I'm serious! I am really looking forward to people... But then of course, you have Apple TV, HBOMax coming in. Oh, great. So I guess we're not going to see people off streaming platforms for awhile. So yeah, but in a very pragmatic and totally self-serving way, I hope people get sick of streaming platforms and the content they put out soon. And then they'll start to realize that sometimes it's worth the effort to go out to your local independent cinema and see something there that isn't easily accessible on your streaming platform. That's my answer.

**Jonathan Tang**

*Or maybe they will decide that they need to have more of a presence in the arthouse world and give you money too.*

**Vincent Quek**

That's very optimistic. I am completely over that. I just want you to get bored of your

**Vincent Quek**

*Love Island, your F-Boy, and your Squid Game. Are you not sick of this? Just watch those until you are tired of them and then you'll realize that maybe Anticipate is here to serve your cultural needs. But in order for people to organically come around to that... I'm trying to be very realistic about it. I'll try to keep going for as long as I can. But if I cannot, I will sell out as well, probably. And then, hopefully, someone else will come to take my place.*

**Jonathan Tang**

*Thank you, Vincent. Here's to weathering the oncoming storm of things to come.*

**Vincent Quek**

I hope I've given you something to chew on. I'm happy to do that.

- April 29, 2022

2022 AFiS Interview Collection :  
**Interviews  
with 33 Asian Film  
Professionals**

by

**Jonathan Tang** is a Singaporean filmmaker based in New York City and Singapore. He is a Busan Asian Film School 2022 fellow.



# PRASHANT SOMOSUNDRAM

General Manager / The Projector

Singapore

Interview by Sam Chua Weishi

Prashant Somosundram is the general manager at the Projector, which is an independent multiplex cinema in Singapore founded by Karen Tan and Blaise Trigg-Smith. What began as an Indiegogo crowdfunding idea came to fruition in December 2014 and continues to expand its reach in the local film exhibition business. The Projector comprises three halls (the Green Room, Blue Room and Redrum) accommodating 500 people pre-COVID located on Level 5 of the Golden Mile Tower along Beach Road. The cinema also houses the intermission bar where moviegoers can purchase food and beverages, and hang out at the foyer.

The team also enjoys adapting old spaces and giving purposes to these abandoned places, giving birth to the Projector X at the Riverside — an 18 months pop-up cinema centrally located also with a bar serving very good hot dogs. This was where we met to have this lovely conversation.

(For those interested to know more, visit <https://theprojector.sg>)

Sam Chua

*What does a typical day look like for you at the Projector?*

Prashant  
Somosundram

The Projector is a bit more than just a cinema. Besides programming films, we do a lot more arts-related activities and events. It is a much more dynamic kind of experience. Personally, I like coming here to work during the day when nobody is around. I consider what I do largely to still be a coordination kind of job, looking at the available upcoming releases, but also a big part of my job is figuring out what experiences can be built around these movies. For us, it's not just about playing a movie and selling tickets, but how we can add value to consumer experiences, so I work closely with my bar team and programming team to try to create a unique experience for them.

Generally I also watch a lot of screeners, which I both love and hate because there's a lot of content coming through and trying to sit through these 2 hours movies. Sometimes I watch 20 movies and end up with only 3 or 4 that I am comfortable programming. Otherwise, it's also sometimes just meeting people, seeing how we can work with people in the industry together to create new experiences.

One of the interesting things that we are doing now is to work with the theatre community, so we are using our space to do more community theatre kind of projects. They're called Pub theatre in the corner here behind you, so we give them the space and they stage the show. So it's a lot more informal but it allows younger playwrights to do stagings and all that. For us, we always believe in going beyond just film with the arts community, and trying to then bridge the arts communities. We work a lot with the Singapore Writers Festival, we also work a lot with embassies.

Tomorrow, for example, we are launching the European Union Film Festival. So that's a lot of coordination work and engagement. So for me there's no typical day, but a lot of coordination work and engagement and a lot of that is on the laptop or face-to-face meetings to brainstorm ideas. We are also working on creating new spaces, so this space (at the Riverside), for example, is only going to be here until the end of this year.

Sam Chua

*I know! I find that really sad; it's a really nice space.*

Prashant  
Somosundram

It is. For us, this was largely a product of COVID, where we were restricted to 50% seating capacity at Golden Mile and we needed to create capacity in order to sustain our base cost. So that's when we found this abandoned club space, which used to be a cinema in the '90s. When it was first built it was a cinema called City Studios. I think it didn't last too long, but it became a few different things after that including the National Museum. I think the Asian Film Archives' first screenings were also in the theater. We then spoke to the landlord who was willing to take a gamble with us. It was a low rent to make it sustainable but obviously then the trade-off is that it's a short-term thing, so we can't be here forever.

But the exciting thing is that we are working on another pop-up project that we will announce in June or July hopefully, so that will be a two-year project. We also do have a permanent space coming up in Orchard at Grange Road near Somerset MRT station, supposedly a single-screen 150 seater. That is going to be a two-storied space, so there will be a Live Nation performance space and a black box as well. But because of COVID, everything has been delayed and construction costs have also increased so we are not

**Prashant Somosundram**

sure when it's going to happen. It was supposed to be at the end of this year right after The Projector X: Riverside concludes here.

Sustainability planning is a big thing we have to think about all the time because Golden Mile is also facing en bloc. If that is the case, we may have to leave in three to four years but we need to start planning something already – it's not as simple as finding any space; we need massive and column-free halls which are not easy to find in Singapore. So there's the operational side of things, and there is also the future-proofing and planning side of things.

**Sam Chua**

*So are you guys buying the new space at Somerset Place?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

No, they build and we operate. For us, we generally look at low-cost options that are not heavy on capital, so that we can then put our resources into programming riskier content rather than big blockbusters. This is also why this space, you can tell, has a bit of a shoestring kind of vibe.

**Sam Chua**

*Yes, I mean we love it – I loved the donated cinema chairs and metallic bar tables and stools.*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Those were the club's leftover chairs. We are thankful that people are willing to embrace this aesthetic!

**Sam Chua**

*It's true. And I had the chance to check out the hall inside when I watched Park Chan-wook's Oldboy (2003), with the headphones on instead of a sound system and I thought that was an interesting experience.*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Correct, so this was truly an experiment for us because we didn't want to spend on acoustic paneling. Speakers are fine because we can take them out and bring them to the new place, but acoustic paneling and treating the walls are very expensive and are stuff that we cannot take out. So we thought, "Let's try these headphones and see what happens." Interestingly, we found an audience who is comfortable and interested in having these kinds of headphones experience. I personally had major reservations about it but ultimately it was a financial decision. But there were people who felt like, "This is actually a much better experience because I don't need to hear the person next to me," and they still feel there is a communal experience around it. There are actually some people who come for the novelty of it, but there are some people who come regularly because they like this new experience. At some point we were thinking whether to switch back to the 5.1 and splurge on curtains to make it more acoustically treated, because we were thinking of negotiating for an extension. But there are now all these people who love this headphone experience so now I'm beholden to them (laughs). So we decided we'll keep this, and then focus on the new project with proper acoustics, since Grange is a permanent venue.

**Sam Chua**

*What got you into films and the arts, and how did you come to join the team at the Projector?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

I did arts when I was in Junior College, so there was always that interest in the arts and in literature, and I was more involved in theatre. When I was pursuing my studies in New York

**Prashant Somosundram**

City, I was exposed to different kinds of content through Film Forum, Angelika Film Center and Anthology Film Archives. Then I interned at an experimental film festival called MIX NYC so it was films that were *really* experimental and out there, which I thought were quite interesting. That was how I got started in film.

When I came back, I needed an outlet so I started a screening room in Haji Lane called Pitch Black around 2004 or 2005. At that time I ran into problems with IMDA, so we submitted our films for ratings because a lot of the documentaries I had chosen were classified R21. At some point they decided to withdraw our R21 licenses. I didn't set up the space to screen films like *High School Musical* so my friends took over and they ran a yoga studio there.

At the same time, I started working with the 2005 M1 Fringe Festival and we worked on some migrant worker projects, which was more me helping them with translations with the Tamil workers. We have this project called the 'Migrant Voices' and they released a CD of migrant workers with recorded music, poetry, and spoken words. I just helped with the producing of it and translations when needed. That was when I got interested in forum theatre and community arts projects. After the Fringe Festival, a bunch of us registered an arts society called 'Migrant Voices', and on weekends we would work with theatre companies like Drama Box and Necessary Stage and photography species to organise workshops and exhibitions. The idea was to engage migrant workers in creative pursuits and use that content to generate conversations amongst Singaporeans. We even had a few forum theatre stagings in Tiong Bahru Plaza and in Bedok, and these were migrant workers acting in foreign theatre projects, and then having audience members intervene. It was very interesting and it really elicited a lot of emotional responses from both the migrant workers and Singaporeans.

After that, I started Artistry which was a cafe at Bugis, so I had to scale down 'Migrant Voices' and focus on this new business, but every evening we would convert the space to have arts-related events. In 2016, the then-general manager of Projector Sharon Tan approached me to take over the bar and run events at the Projector. She found that there was a lot more alignment to the stuff that I did at Artistry with the stuff that Projector wants to do. That year, we took over from the previous bar tenant, who was not interested in figuring out an alignment with the arts community. I was managing the bar and Artistry at that time, but it made sense to just consolidate and focus on the Projector. So in 2018, I wound up Artistry, and Projector bought over the bar so we merged into a single entity. Initially I was just a tenant to Projector, but after two years they thought it made sense to buy over. For me, I was profiting a lot more from just alcohol sales, but I didn't really have much of a choice because they could have just found another tenant, even though we are all friends.

At that point, Sharon had been running it for about five years, so she was looking for something different. She left to join SGIFF as a festival manager, so we were thinking about whether to hire a new general manager to handle the cinema side while I continue to handle the bar and events. But for continuity and alignment in the Projector brand, we decided I would manage the whole thing. Currently, the main people who drive the business development side are the founders Karen and Blaze – Karen is the face of Projector, who also happens to be Sharon's sister.

**Sam Chua**

*And all this began with Indiegogo?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Yes, I was in fact one of the Indiegogo contributors and now here I am! Who would've known? I had been conversing with Sharon prior to that, and with my experience with Pitch Black, I was quite excited when she spoke to me about this project. We started in December 2014 and I'm quite happy that we are still here after eight years. Of course it's not always a smooth process. It's good to have two business partners who are very business-minded in a way, which I think has always been the challenge with sustaining arts entities — a lot of them are creative but not business-minded. I'm definitely not super financial or interested in that space so I'm more like creative producing. It's good to have Karen and Blaze who are crunching numbers all the time, and doing hard negotiations with landlords. So I think that has been helpful in terms of sustainability of the entity. Labour and rent are big cost factors, so renting this place (the Riverside) for example wouldn't be possible if not for an unimaginable kind of rental deal that they came up with. And this is the same thing with the next pop up that we're doing.

**Sam Chua**

*Let's talk a bit about why the new Projector needs to be in Grange, which is a pretty central area in Singapore near Orchard Road?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Yes, there are a few different reasons. A lot of the content we show tends to be classified R21, which then has this ambiguous kind of understanding that we cannot be exhibiting in the heartlands or residential areas. It is not written anywhere but it is an understanding. You would still need to submit an application and wait to see, and probably would need to appeal if it is somehow in the middle of a residential estate — cinemas in Clementi for example wouldn't be able to have a R21 license. That is why we are largely in the central area so we can programme freely.

For us, it is also wanting to access a different crowd and to create an independent space in what is almost a commercial mecca, so to kind of stake our claim in this kind of space and location. And to make this a viable business, rather than always finding a temporary fringe space. It is like bringing people together and giving them access to almost prime commercial space but not at prime commercial prices. So that was our rationale. A lot of people were thinking this is very off-brand, because we are not in Golden Mile or Geylang which are places more associated with an indie fringe, and that Orchard will be the last place you would expect Projector to be. But for us, it's more about us remaking the space and creating a space that is more suited to the brand, where people will be comfortable going to these spaces. It's like creating an oasis for independent artists and the arts community, which is why we're also designing the space to be more like a blackbox with potential for retractable seats and live music, rather than a straight-up cinema. We wanted to allow possibilities for live theatre and performances.

This is also what stimulates us — brainstorming and organising new creative projects. But to sustain that, we need to grow our community as well, which is why positioning ourselves in the heart of Orchard might be an interesting experiment where you are going beyond just your converted arts community or people who are invested in indie films. And that's where I always feel that that cross-pollination can happen, which was the magic in Golden Mile in a way because we could have a drag show happening in the blue room and there are other people coming to watch *Dr. Strange* in the Redrum. Yet the

**Prashant Somosundram**

foyer space is this communal experience where you have these diverse experiences and at the end of the movies, we've always designed it such that you don't get ejected out into staircases or cargo lift lobbies. You always end up in the foyer and that's where the communal experience happens. This was a deliberate decision because we felt that it is better to pull people back into the space for that conversation and interaction to happen, especially in those days when social distancing was not an issue. Obviously when we had to do crowd control because of COVID, it was incredibly challenging and all we could do was just hope that people would leave. Now it is okay again, so the energy is coming back.

Once, we did some random interviews with people and found out that there are people who come because they enjoy people-watching at the intermission bar. So the crowd at Projector is quite broad and it also depends on the movies that we show. Personally, when I'm around I do watch and wonder why this particular person picked this movie when it is not the 'right' demographic.

**Sam Chua**

*What kind of audiences does the Projector attract, or what have you observed of the moviegoers?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

It's really very diverse. For example, the *Writing with Fire* kind of documentary attracts a totally different audience than *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. To me, that's the magic of Projector, in a way that people can come and feel comfortable and still feel a sense of ownership for the space even though they're all here for very different experiences. So it's difficult for me to pinpoint a specific kind of demographic.

At some point when we were thinking about whether we needed to expand, we spoke to a friend who was a marketing consultant, and he did interviews with random people in the foyer. He came up with three categories of the people that come — First, there are the film addicts who come purely for the film and they don't care about the F&B and all that. Then, there are people from the arts community who want the creative vibe and they quite enjoy just being there, and then there is this last one which was the most interesting: the ones who come to see and be seen. This is something that I never really thought about, but it's a cool factor. These people want to tell others that, "I was at Projector last weekend," and then they come to partake. So that's the third entity which wasn't by design, but whatever we are doing somehow draws them. It still generally tends to be younger demographics from 25 up to 40 years old. We have a senior membership programme that we are trying out to reach older audiences. We do have a lot of retirees with quite interesting quirky characters who come to watch films. Some of them are really film buffs; they keep a journal about what they watch and they stand at the box office to talk to our staff about the film.

**Sam Chua**

*When you talk about retirees, I realised the Projector doesn't open during the day.*

**Prashant Somosundram**

No, it's not open so they come for the 4.30pm and 5pm screenings. This was a conscious decision to keep costs low and the team lean. Otherwise I will need to have shifts, which may not make financial sense. It may open earlier during the school holidays in June but that's also not our thing. In fact, we only used to do the after-work hours between 7.30pm and 8pm, but because of COVID and work from home, we started the 4pm and 4.30pm screenings just to spread out the seats. So if people wanted a quiet screening, they could

**Prashant Somosundram**

choose something here. We still get low numbers for this timing, but we may reassess that now that we are back to 100% seating capacity. I'm also conscious that it's just 20 people running two locations seven days a week for one place, and five days a week for this other place.

**Sam Chua**

*What about younger audiences? I haven't seen any children at Projector every time I am here.*

**Prashant Somosundram**

We've actually tried. A few times we organised a *Frozen* sing-a-long. It was fine, but some people also don't want to bring their children to Golden Mile, so maybe with the new space it may be better suited for the younger audiences. It's not that we hate children, it's just that the location does not lend itself well. We even collaborated with Netflix to organise activities like colouring in the foyer.

**Sam Chua**

*Do you feel that the quality of local films has anything to do with audience consumption?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

\*let's out an audible sigh\* I think it's really about accessibility; we do have a lot of good local films but somehow they don't get the audiences that they deserve. And then there's other films like your Chinese New Year releases which have big marketing budgets to recoup their costs, whereas all the films by Akanga or Potocol have jarringly smaller budgets. This is why sometimes we work with local filmmakers, like Panuksmi, and we program in our Blue Room and just do a revenue share. So it's not a theatrical release, but at least the films are available. I was just talking with her about *Scene Unseen*. It won't be a theatrical release but a slow drip kind of thing where the film is available, we promote it and nobody has expectations. It's sad, but at least there's an option to watch it.

I'm also talking to Ken Quek about his banned film *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* that has a lot of race and religious themes. It has been 10 years since it was banned in 2012, so we are thinking to re-submit it for a re-release, to see if we have progressed in 10 years or not. Otherwise, we may try a one-off screening.

**Sam Chua**

*Talking about banning films, I wanted to steer the conversation to talk a bit about censorship in Singapore. Could you share with us your experiences with this?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Everything that we screen at Projector is rated, but sometimes things tend to be not controversial in our eyes, but maybe because IMDA has diplomatic concerns since they answer to a lot of other entities, so they are kind of stuck in between also. It's a constant negotiation and discussion I would say; we do have a very good working relationship with them. It's really getting on phone calls, let's see how we can make this work. Sometimes we have content that instead of screening thrice, we may be restricted to screening just once for example. But for us, it's also always trying not to practice any self-censorship in terms of programming. So we are constantly pushing boundaries in terms of what can be done, and trying to justify reasons for why this film needs to be programmed, and then engaging IMDA with those reasons. I think we have become a bit of a trusted entity in a way, which may have been a different story eight years ago. Now they kind of know how we work, so it's a pretty good relationship.

Sometimes it can be frustrating because the commercial aspects can be affected, and I

**Prashant Somosundram**

know that there is enough demand, like the Cantonese films for example. This has been a major pain point for us, because dialect films cannot have a theatrical release, so they can only be festival releases for example, and that's really frustrating. When we did the Wong Kar Wai retrospective, obviously the demand was far more than the six screenings that we were allowed. There was this unnatural restriction in supply which then frustrated a lot of people — people were flooding our websites and it literally caused our ticketing system to collapse. All this wouldn't have been an issue if we were just allowed to do a proper theatrical release. I also think the justification with the dialect policy is a bit archaic given that now on Netflix and other streaming platforms or even in some other TV programmes, there are dialect programmes. Personally, I think it's an unfair legacy that's still here, and we have tried to engage IMDA on this repeatedly. Again, recently we screened the Anita Mui documentary and everyone was writing to us, but we were only allowed to do two or three screenings. It's just odd that for any other language, dialects don't matter but for Chinese dialects there is a ban. So somebody can watch a Polish dialect film unlimited but a Cantonese or Hokkien film will not be allowed. It's really stemming from the old 'speak Mandarin' policy, and there seems to be a bit of inertia to revisit that policy, which needs to be done, given how all our competitors are allowed to have practically free reign, and by competitors I mean streaming platforms and internet content. They are not policed in the way that cinemas are policed in terms of releasing these films. So while we work with IMDA, we are also trying to communicate the need for some policy change.

The interesting thing with a lot of the race and religious kind of content is that some of it may never see the light of day in a sense that we submit it for ratings and it does not even get rated. It goes into a consultancy limbo kind of thing, until we feel the window has passed. It's not a no, but it is a long process consulting with religious authorities, with this and that, and then we check back months later, and they are still in consultation. Then, we are just withdrawing this title from consideration because it has gone onto the internet or something else happens. So this happens a lot with the religious, political and sexual identity type of content.

**Sam Chua**

*That's surprising, because I had watched 1987: Untracing the Conspiracy at the Projector a few years ago?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Yes, that's also very interesting. Whereas Tan Pin Pin's film cannot. So it's also a bit arbitrary. Sometimes for us to make commercial decisions, we need to submit the film for ratings first. If it gets approved then we can go ahead to confirm the title. There are some stuff that we didn't imagine would be problematic, for example this documentary with Ren Hang, the artist-photographer who committed suicide. We had already paid for three screenings and suddenly IMDA told us we could only do one screening, so we lost some money there. Now, for films with any of these three themes, we always make sure we get censorship clearance first before we go ahead. To me, it's painful on two fronts — the topics we want to address, which is something that our team at the Projector is quite interested in like women's rights and race, but also just commercially we are penalized from that so it's a bit frustrating.

We are also not allowed to have the phrase 'Jesus Fucking Christ' in a movie. So any JFC utterances in whatever language must be censored. Generally, we don't screen censored

**Prashant Somosundram**

films. But if they allow us to put a mute, we will put a notice and do it, otherwise we can't screen films like *Pulp Fiction*. Last year, there was this movie called *Truffle Hunters* which was about old Italian men with their truffle-hunting dogs, a super charming movie. I know we're gonna make money out of this — all the dog lovers will come and the food lovers who are into truffles will come. But there was this one scene where the guy is chopping the wood and he had cursed something like 'fucking mother of Christ' in Italian. That got translated, and it was restricted to a single screening at SGIFF. The producers also didn't want to mute that line, and we need to respect the producers and the directors' decisions. So to me it was a shame. We could have changed or even removed the subtitles, or left it in Italian.

So there are all these nuances that we have to deal with in censorship, which always makes it fun.

**Sam Chua**

*Thank you for sharing generously about the censorship in Singapore; it was enriching to have heard about this from your perspective. I saw that you were on the jury for the Asian Film Archive shorts this year.*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Yes, Viknesh reached out to me. Shorts have always been interesting for us, because people are always asking us if we can programme shorts, but we don't know how to ticket them. Sometimes we do programme a short film prior to a certain screening if there is an alignment, but then we are also thinking how do we do a revenue share split with you. For the feature films, already 60% goes to distributors, so then how do we make it financially viable for you, as a short filmmaker, to screen your film? It's

a space that we don't yet know how to negotiate. In fact, now with Projector Plus, it gives us a bit more flexibility in programming short films. We've listed a few shorts including *Three Cents a Kilo* and Projector Plus allows us to platform our short films. We work with SCAPE to do their National Youth Film Awards (NYFA) films and with SGIFF for an extended programme. So when people visit our website, they somehow stumble into Projector Plus and they watch it. Our streaming platform allows us to do that, but I find it hard to programme and figure out how to remunerate the filmmaker because for us, it cannot be 'for exposure' or for free.

**Sam Chua**

*Coming to talk about the Projector Plus, I know it was a result of COVID-19. Can you talk a bit more about it and how it has been received?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

It pretty much came to a point where we didn't know when we could reopen. This was literally during the circuit breaker and cinemas were told to close with no reopening date. Nobody knew what was going to happen and at that point we had 14 mouths to feed, so we had to figure something out. The first thing we did was a merchandising push selling tote bags, vouchers, and memberships. So that gave us a decent amount of cash flow to sustain, and then we could figure out a long-term plan. That was when we started to engage with developers; I would say none in our team are tech people, so it was a super steep learning curve for us talking to friends who are tech-inclined then talking to actual developers to figure out the options. The easy options like Vimeo came at a very high cost at that point for the right DRMs, so they were talking about digital rights, watermarking and forensic watermarking (meaning that if somebody downloads a film, you will know and you can trace who downloaded it). Finally we used Shift72, which was actually used by

**Prashant Somosundram**

a lot of international cinemas when COVID started, so that was an easy platform and it's the one that Kinolounge or Shaw adopted. For us, we consulted IMDA and we needed the R21 pin, which Shift72 had not developed at that time when COVID just started, which kind of defeated our purpose because a lot of our content is rated. We needed to develop one that was suited to our needs, so we ultimately shortlisted some developers in Pakistan because it fit our budget.

We developed the first Projector Plus in three months. By the time we were ready to launch, cinemas were allowed to reopen but there were still many restrictions in terms of seating capacity. For us it was still ultimately an insurance plan in case things happened again, or if variants came up, so we are still keeping it alive and populating it with content. It definitely had its peak two years ago in December 2020 when we hosted SGIFF virtually. Since then, it's now more used by people who cannot come to the cinema for different reasons like timing, or they have families and can only watch after 10pm. We have people who have emailed to say that they are glad Projector Plus exists so they still have an option to watch films. We are servicing it but it's not a high priority for us now, except for certain festivals that we do. Usually when we organise showcases, we make sure that we do something in the streaming space also, so something like four films in the theatre and two virtual. We definitely will keep it going for a while, and we have since moved to Shift72 since they developed the R21 pin code. It was definitely worth it, and it was good that we did it on a low cost that paid off within the first few months. It was a challenge developing a streaming platform over Zoom, with developers who may not fully understand the language, but we got there.

For us then, Projector Plus will offer an opportunity for more shorts to be visible. At least now, we have something we can use to platform short films, or just other feature content like *The Last Artisan* which is about Haw Par Villa, that will have a limited theatrical release. At least if it is on Projector Plus, it is accessible to people who need to do Haw Par Villa research or people interested in the heritage of Singapore.

**Sam Chua**

*What do you feel about the presence of streaming platforms in Singapore?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

I'm a big fan! I watch a lot and to me, they all serve different purposes — Netflix is my guilty pleasure. I binge-watch *Selling Sunset* for example, because sometimes you just need a break from watching all these screeners. Projector Plus offers a bit more content that you may not find on all these other streamers. It's still a bit more curated in a way; we help filter it for people who don't want to go through this entire Netflix catalog so that element of discovery is easier. Especially if you are going for something specific. Otherwise, I see them all as complementary to the theatrical experience. I think people still have that appetite for a communal viewing on a large screen — it's a night out kind of experience. Especially for us at Golden Mile, you come, you have a drink at the bar, you watch a movie, then you go out for Thai food after the movie. But I am conscious that this is something that any cinema can replicate, which is why our front-facing staff are also critical in that experience. They make the difference in a way rather than going to an anonymous multiplex, so every touchpoint is quite important to us.

**Sam Chua**

*Generally, is this exhibition business profitable?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

It is, otherwise we wouldn't be where we are and we wouldn't be growing. In fact, in January 2020 just before COVID hit, we were at our peak. We were sailing on all these expansion plans like the one at Grange Road. Because to be fair, the Projector is barely a fraction of the cinema industry in Singapore. I think we are just 1 percent. So there is definitely room for us to grow, whereas for some other larger cinema chains, they need much more consideration and consolidation. For us, we see at least two to three locations coming up and ideally geographically spread.

We are also engaging developers and all those who are interested in our brand and audience, where we can have a mutually beneficial partnership because we bring footfall, so we are constantly engaging developers to see if there is anything in their new developments we can work with. And this is largely based on the fact that we are very aware that Golden Mile will not stand forever, and we have a team of 20 that still need employment when that happens. For us, we needed to find a mothership where we know that we can be there for at least 9 to 12 years. At Golden Mile, it feels like there's this proverbial ax hanging over our head because we don't know when the place will be put on the block. Every 2 to 3 years we have to renew the lease, so it is a bit difficult to have a long-term plan when it comes to Golden Mile. We have been there for eight years this December, but it has always been a nomadic kind of experience. It is still not a long-term commitment from the landlords, so from a business point of view, it's very hard to plan if you (a) don't own the property and (b) only have short term leases. So for us it needs to be a minimally 6-year commitment in order to invest and have a guaranteed ROI. Which is also why we are scrappy not by design, but by necessity.

This is the interesting thing. People actually like that they can be comfortable and not too precious about the space, which is something that we found out by accident. People feel that it's actually a lot more accessible that it is not carpeted floors, and you can feel relaxed in a way that you may find difficult in a more posh kind of space, which is always nice to look at but you need to be a bit more guarded. So the casual vibes at Golden Mile allow us to do the ratchet parties that we do. Before COVID at Golden Mile, the way we designed the experience especially on a Friday and Saturday was that the moment you come out of the last screenings, there would either be a live band or a live DJ at the foyer. The idea was that you would have a bit of entertainment, you can hang out, and sometimes it's even related entertainment. One night when we screened *Whiplash*, we had a jazz band after that because we knew that the demographics would be right and they would hang out. But because of noise issues with some new neighbours and COVID, we had to stop that. Now, here at Riverside every Friday and Saturday, we do live performances so it has been going pretty well. It just started late last month in April because of the night-life relaxation in Singapore. This Friday we'll have a live band, and on Sunday we have our one-year anniversary party for Projector X, so that's a bit more of a carnival with live music and DJ right up to 3am open to the public.

**Sam Chua**

*Let's move on to talk about the exhibition industry at large in Singapore. Do you feel like Singapore has enough screens for the audiences?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

I think yes, definitely there are a lot of screens, maybe even too many screens. If I may pivot this conversation a little bit, to me, the difficulty is in film education. And this is also our challenge — trying to get Singaporeans to appreciate movies from non-traditional

**Prashant Somosundram**

sources, like Indonesian films or independent South Asian films for example. Films that are beyond the Japanese and Korean big-name directors. It's been very hard for us to give screen time to independent regional films. Case in point, we screened *Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021) and *Yuni* (2021), which are both films that I had expected to do much better than the actual box office sales. I think there's generally just not enough appreciation, so if people were to choose between *Drive My Car* (2021) or those two Indonesian films, they just gravitate towards the Japanese film. I guess from a pop culture point of view, this is because Japanese or Korean content are more familiar grounds. So it's our challenge that we are trying to push more content from these regions, but it's also very hard to make it commercially viable, and I feel this should start from film education. How do I change people's mindsets to make them open to even choosing to buy tickets to watch it? It's something I obviously haven't cracked yet but I'll definitely continue to programme as much as I can, because someone may be bored one day to give this a chance. I think to me, there's definitely a lot of screens, but the content is also a reflection of what consumers want, and my challenge is now how to make consumers want something different. It's something I hope to see, although obviously we don't make films like *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022). Even this I was actually quite surprised, because it's a film that is in that middle ground between commercial and arthouse, and somehow it managed to get a bit of a crossover of audiences. There's Michelle Yeoh and it's like an Asian immigrant family kind of story, and I think if you throw any other random person in Michelle Yeoh's character, people will probably be confused; I think she managed to bridge that gap.

**Sam Chua**

*What do you hope to see done better in the film industry in Singapore?*

**Prashant Somosundram**

Besides the film education that I spoke about earlier, the other thing is the censorship issue we need to deal with. There's a cost associated with censorship — i.e. per film we submit it costs S\$320 (US\$230) for a two-hour film. It's about 82 bucks per 30 minutes to submit your film, and you will need to do this for a commercial release. Unless you are a non-profit film, it costs S\$20 (US\$ 15) for 30 minutes and it takes 30 work days to get the non-profit film processed. Whereas it is 10 work days for commercial films. So if it's costing me 320 bucks, then I need to be quite sure that this independent film will make money because of the distributor fees and the materials fees on top of this rating submission fees. There are a lot of commercial considerations that go into programming, and the ambiguity or the barriers associated with censorship kind of prevents us from being a bit more liberal in terms of the programming that we can do.

For me, one of my wishes would be at least to make censorship stuff more cost-neutral, which they did during COVID. For a period of time, it was free to submit for ratings, so we then submitted whatever we could, even films that we didn't think would make money, but at least you didn't need to worry about losing S\$320. Now those barriers are all back since last year, even before we went back to a 100% seating capacity. In fact, last year in July when they brought it back, I actually went to talk to them personally because it just doesn't make sense for me. To have one screening with 50 people, I would need to list my tickets at S\$30 (US\$22) to just recoup distributor costs and censorship costs. At least if I am allowed at full seating capacity, I could make it work.

That's one thing, but the other big thing is more about trying to figure out how we can

**Prashant  
Somosundram**

make these independent films more accessible or more appealing to a mainstream audience. So for us, it's also thinking about what kind of experiences we can build around the film. And also getting people within our community to recruit more people; the weird friend that pulls their friends to watch the films at Projector. When I spoke earlier about the three types of people at Projector, that's the last group of audience who come to see and be seen, and then end up being converted. So that is our focus now, to build that audience and try to then get them into the film addict space. To me, the experience is a big part of it, so for them, if they see it as 'let's take a chance to go on a night out to Projector, choose a random film, you may or may not like it but it's still a fun night out kind of thing' and this is what I'm focusing on and banking on.

**Sam Chua**

*Thank you Prashant, for your time and candor. I am excited for Projector's upcoming plans, and I really appreciate what Projector is doing to grow our community and industry.*

*- 11 May 2022*

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

**by Sam Chua** (<https://samcweishi.com/works>) is a film producer born and based in Singapore. She was introduced to filmmaking in 2017 while she was on an exchange semester in New York City and produced a thesis short film set in WWII while there. When she returned home, she continued producing short films, commercials and music videos in Singapore and in Malaysia. Her first feature film *Pierce* written and directed by Nelicia Low is in post-production, and she is currently developing several features exploring themes of a young girl's coming-of-age, of love, and of living. She is a Busan Asian Film School 2022 Fellow and still works at production company Potocol.



# TAN SI EN

Producer / Co-founder of Momo Film Co.  
Singapore

Interview by Lee Yi Jia

TAN Si En was the assistant producer of Kirsten Tan's *POP AYE*, which won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival 2017 and the VPRO Big Screen Award at International Film Festival Rotterdam. She then went on to produce Anthony Chen's *Wet Season*, which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival 2019, Platform Competition, and which subsequently received 10 awards internationally. Her latest co-production *The Year of the Everlasting Storm* premiered in Cannes Film Festival 2021. She is currently developing and co-producing projects such as *Don't Cry, Butterfly* by Duong Dieu Linh (Moulin d'Andé—CECI award), *Arnold is a Model Student* by Sorayos Prapapan (IFFR Hubert Bals Fund), *This City is a Battlefield* by Mouly Surya, and *Some Nights I Feel Like Walking* by Petersen Vargas, among others.

Momo Film Co. is a Singapore-based film and TV company, which, in recent months, became part of Beach House Pictures and Blue Ant Media. Apart from producing scripted content, Momo Film Co. also conceptualised several film support initiatives, such as the Short Film Incubator and the Momo Distribution Grant.

Lee Yi Jia

*How did you end up becoming a producer?*

Tan Si En

When I was younger, I was in love with watching TV — I was super addicted to it. So I always knew that I wanted to be behind moving images. Then when I was 12, my school took part in a national video competition, and they selected me and four other people. Somehow, I ended up in the role of “producing”. We went to the awards ceremony at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. They were giving out keychains for the School of Film, Sound & Video, which was of a little slate design, and I hung it on my bag throughout the whole of my secondary school education. That was the school I wanted to go to, so after secondary school, I ended up there. That was where I met people like writer-director Kris Ong and cinematographer Lincoln Yeo, who then became close collaborators of mine.

Somehow, producing came very natural to me. I just enjoyed the work and being able to see a product through, from the very beginning till the end of it. But after I made my thesis, though, I was a little bit burned out, and then I decided, “Okay, maybe I'm gonna quit.” “Was producing what I wanted to do with my life? Maybe not.” And then I left production and went to study philosophy for a couple of years.

Lee Yi Jia

*What actually made you say “yes” to going back to producing?*

Tan Si En

One day out of the blue, Lai Weijie, who was the producer of Kirsten Tan's *POP AYE* (2017) approached me on Facebook, asking if I was free for a coffee, because he had a proposition to make. And then I met him at my school canteen. He asked me if I wanted to work on *POP AYE* as the assistant producer, and then Kirsten turned up during that lunch too. I was thinking really hard about it — because I was supposed to go to New York at the exact same time for some start-up thing. I thought really hard about it, and I think a large part of the reason was that *POP AYE* was set in Thailand. The other reason was because the script was really interesting for me. So I decided to go. I took a semester off and went to Thailand. During the project, there was a night that was really difficult. And it was during that difficult night that I felt that despite the difficulties that come with this profession, I think I could do this forever. From then on, I have worked very closely with Weijie and Anthony Chen, who were both at Giraffe Pictures at that time, and I worked with them for about five, six years before I started my own company, Momo Film Co.

Lee Yi Jia

*How did Momo Film Co. come about?*

Tan Si En

So I did *POP AYE*, then I joined Giraffe Pictures to develop and produce projects. I started Momo sometime in between, when I was working with Giraffe on a project basis. I started it because I wanted to create a space for emerging filmmakers and fresh voices from the region. I witnessed a lot of spaces that were unsafe for young creators with a lack of support, so Momo was a response to that. With Kris, my co-founder, we have similar ambitions of wanting to do something bigger, so we started with a couple of short films before Momo started more programmes for other filmmakers.

Lee Yi Jia

*Apart from the idea behind the Momo initiatives, how did you go about the practical execution of it?*

Tan Si En

I worked at the Singapore International Film Festival for a couple of years, so by that time,

**Tan Si En**

I had links to financiers and people who were aligned with what I do. For the programmes run by Momo, we partner with the right partners. For example, we partnered with Objectifs for the incubator. For the distribution grant, we worked with C47. We already had a relationship with them as they first supported Kris' short, and we knew that they were interested in Southeast Asian filmmakers and their potential. For production and distribution of some of our short films, we support them differently according to their needs.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*What made Momo move into the new partnership with Beach House Pictures/Blue Ant Media? Was it something you guys sought after?*

**Tan Si En**

It just happened organically. I was looking to see how we could grow and expand into the scripted, episodic space. And then I had a chance encounter with my friend, whom I knew from the National University of Singapore — I didn't know her very well, but I always knew that she was into film and documentaries. She joined Beach House after she graduated and has been there since. We started talking and I found out they were looking to expand. So we met and there was really great rapport between us, they really respected the vision that we had. I like working with them, so that came quite naturally. Beach House does unscripted, factual content, and they were looking to expand into the scripted content space. And I suppose, in Southeast Asia, some of the companies are run by a single person or often associated with a director. And so when they were looking to buy into companies, they really liked that we had a variety on our slate.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Was there a jump between what you guys were used to doing?*

**Tan Si En**

It's different and we've grown quite a lot since. Initially, we were doing a lot more shorts, features, and co-productions. But now we're moving into the scripted TV space, which is, I think, in a lot of ways more commercial. So the type of connections we then need to have is entirely different. The structure of financing a TV piece is very different from an independent film or even a commercial film.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Would you still keep Momo as a beacon of sorts, for indie films?*

**Tan Si En**

Yes, because we are not going to stop doing shorts and features. It's just that we want to expand into the TV space for the sustainability of filmmakers and producers. Personally I'm not interested in doing commercials, TVCs, and stuff like that, so I needed to look at another way to make sure it works for me and the creators I work with in between the feature projects.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*How did you make this job financially sustainable for yourself, in the beginning? Or has it been perpetually tough?*

**Tan Si En**

I think if you talk to any other producer, they'll also agree that it's tough. I think it's always tough with independent films, just because producing is a role that isn't paid properly in relation to the amount of time we put in. So when I first started working on a project basis with Giraffe Pictures, I also did programming work. But then again, I live very simply! (*laughs*) But moving into TV, because of the support we have, it's slightly more comfortable now.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*What do you feel about the Singaporean film industry?*

**Tan Si En**

I feel like the industry is growing. Singapore's an interesting market — it's very small. So the big players in TV or film don't often look here because it's such a small market. Business-wise, it makes very little sense. But it's interesting that we have these efforts from the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) to nurture talent. And I think that has paid off in some regard. We have a lot of festival-winning directors, at least in the arthouse realm. Singapore has become quite recognisable in putting out interesting films. The co-production grants by the SFC help producers and companies in Singapore connect with projects that are outside of Singapore, which makes sense for us, because we're a country where a lot of money flows through anyway. But the challenge is, beyond that, in a landscape that's shifting so fast all the time and in a landscape that's uncertain, what are the next steps? That's why I think, generally, people do much more TV now, with CJ Entertainment, with Netflix, with HBO. So it's streamer-backed, which is an interesting move. Although the backing of the streamer is tied to the government's backing, I think it'll be exciting when we have enough private financing within Singapore, and people become willing to finance it without the support of the Infocomm Media Development Authority.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Do you feel like it's possible to eventually finance this way?*

**Tan Si En**

I think it's going to be tough, but I don't think it's impossible. But it's a tall order. Because I think the Singapore industry is strong in terms of creators, filmmakers, above the line, streamers coming here. But in terms of the entire ecosystem, film literacy amongst the general public isn't high. In France, people are taught film from very young, whilst in Singapore, it's not something that is practical or pragmatic. And it reflects in the way films are being financed, in the way people are receiving local films. The sheer number of crew is quite limited too. So in order for the whole industry to grow, the ecosystem needs to be able to support it. I think we're a bit lopsided now.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Is the Singaporean audience something you often bear in mind?*

**Tan Si En**

For short films I don't because I feel like it's important for people to just run with their own thoughts and it's a medium that allows for that. For features and TV, I do think about the audience point-of-view, but not necessarily locally, as the market is truly small. Although it's important and I care about people's perception of it, I think about audiences in a wider sense, like for example, whether it's an arthouse audience, etc.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*On that note, how do you see the entire Singaporean film landscape changing?*

**Tan Si En**

I think it's always gonna be difficult, because in filmmaking and the recreation of reality, to replicate it, is like going against the flow of life. It's always gonna be difficult. Initially I thought, "Oh, POP AYE is really difficult, I think the next one, I can deal with it." And then there came Wet Season, which was also like another mammoth. It just gets more difficult.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*What do you mean by it being "against the flow of life"?*

**Tan Si En**

You're like, kind of putting a pause to something or you're trying to create a moment in

**Tan Si En**

time that people have either moved on from — because we're not doing documentaries, where we document people, we are not like a team of five. We have a team of 70 or 100, trying to recreate a very specific scene. At times we need a lot of specificity, in creating an entire world that you imagine or that you envision, maybe heightened from reality or like a memory you remember. The thing I feel the most about in Singapore is we move on from the past and things get erased, too often. For example, just sourcing for locations: the site changes, from week to week, the perspective of the landscape changes. And so you're doing a lot to fight that. You're doing a lot to preserve the vision you have for the film.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Then how do you reconcile with this push against the flow of time?*

**Tan Si En**

I think film is quite special, because it will always preserve certain things. When you look at any film, whether it's good or bad, it captures time and space and even political views. For me, producing is the balance of artistry, or telling a story, with the practicality of getting it made. I always see myself as an artist — or at least I pretend to be one. In my own practice, I think it's beginning to shift a little. Representation is going to be a large part of why I do what I do. Supporting and championing the causes and people that I'm interested in.

For example, a week ago, I went to SXSW and watched a documentary, called "Still Working 9 to 5", and it was a derivative of the film called "9 to 5", with Dolly Parton and Michael Caine. It was really interesting for me because they made that film in conjunction with a movement called 9 to 5. It was a movement where people were fighting for the rights of secretaries in America. At the time, females could only get assigned secretary work because of gender, and they were never paid equally. The movie was really fascinating. Because it had three female leads, and I think at the time, it was never done. So like when they were financing it, people kept asking, "Who's the male lead?". It was also one of the first times ever that secretaries were represented on screen. In some ways, it's such an unimportant moment in the eyes of our society, right? So it became really powerful, it earned a lot of money. But what was fascinating to me even till today, the rights that those people fought for, we're not nearly there yet. It was very interesting in terms of seeing how firstly, representation could make a difference. But secondly, how tragic our society is that when people are fighting for equality, it seems so impossible. But seriously, it costs nothing for things to be fought for. For example, for queer rights, for queer people to be acknowledged, or for us to treat minorities in a respectful manner.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*Do you feel like the films you make and the filmmakers you work with gear towards that?*

**Tan Si En**

I don't have anything concrete but when I work with people, I always look at a few things. One of them is their voice; I need to make sure their voice is exciting for me to hear or something that I can stand behind. And secondly, we need to have chemistry, like the director-producer relationship, because we'll spend so much time together and it's always going to have its ups and downs. Chemistry is a large part of it. And before I go into any working relationship with them I always look for growth, from short film to short film. Because sure, you can have one short that goes into a prestigious festival, but then the next short isn't good. So yes, I'm looking for the growth in between shorts and how the next one is going to be different or fresh. These are the things I look out for when I work with someone. If the voice is fresh or interesting, I will always try to support the person as

**Tan Si En**

much as possible. But also, in terms of the causes I care for, I want to make space to work with people who may belong to the minority, and who are trying to tell stories that talk about issues they care about.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*For your collaborators, how do you all get connected in the first place?*

**Tan Si En**

I think it really depends, because sometimes we're just at the right time, in the right place and people are looking for producers, the right partners. It just comes together. But there are projects where they come to me and I can't get on just because I don't have bandwidth, or they come to me but I don't identify with the story, or there's no chemistry, and then that can't work. So it's a mix. At this point, I only really want to work with people who are trying to be the best in what they do, only then we can all grow together.

When you hang out with mediocre people then you become mediocre as well. I love being with people who challenge me, whether it's difficult or not. It is great that as a team we can keep pushing the envelope together. Otherwise, you're just gonna stay stagnant.

**Lee Yi Jia**

*What do you feel like are your next steps, moving forward?*

**Tan Si En**

The most immediate goal for me is to have enough TV projects to keep going. But for Momo Film Co., the goal is to be one of the most recognisable companies for scripted content in Southeast Asia. As long as I don't stay stagnant, that's okay.

*- April 30, 2022*

**by** **Lee Yi Jia (yijiadoesthings@gmail.com)** is an independent Singaporean producer, constantly seeking ways to tell unheard stories and incite conversations on new perspectives. Her love for filmmaking developed out of an amalgamation of photography and theatre, and film became an extension of how she could see the world through a lens that goes beyond her own individual life. She loves the collaborative spirit of filmmaking, experimenting with new filmmakers and working under different creative boundaries.



# VIMUKTHI JAYASUNDARA

Filmmaker / Screenwriter / Film Critic

Sri Lanka

Interview by Hasantha Dissanayake

Vimukthi Jayasundara is a Sri Lankan filmmaker who was born in Galle in the Southern region of Sri Lanka in 1977. He is a journalist, film critic and writer for the screen. He attended the Institute for Film and Television in Pune, India, from 1998 to 2001. Afterwards he made *The Land Of Silence*, a black and white documentary about the victims of the civil war which was selected for several international film festivals including Marseilles, Rotterdam and Berlin. Vimukthi Jayasundara studied in France at the Fresnoy School of Art before becoming a resident at the Cinéfondation of the Festival de Cannes in 2003. In 2004 he directed his first feature, *The Forsaken Land*, which was awarded the Camera d'Or at the Festival de Cannes 2005. He has so far directed about eight feature films, and also worked as a producer and screenwriter on several other feature films. Several of his films were produced as international co-productions. *Her, Him, The Other* was an anthology film that he made with Ashoka Handagama and Prasanna Vithanage in 2018.

Hasantha  
Dissanayake

*What is the beginning of your filmmaking career and what influenced you to become a filmmaker?*

Vimukthi  
Jayasundara

When I was a little wandering boy, the television was black and white. So to see anything in color, we had to go to the cinema. So actually I went to the cinema with my mother and father, and we had a family habit to go to see whatever film was coming. My mother had quite a lot of interest in Bollywood cinema. So I was very much exposed to Bollywood cinema at a very young age. My father was a science teacher. So I used to go and watch many science fiction films with him on the large screen. So I kind of grew up in a very cinephile family atmosphere with my father and mother. But we never had any connections to professionals in the film industry.

Then eventually I came to Colombo to work in an advertising agency. Anyway, I was a film fan so I used to watch a lot of films going around in Colombo to cultural institutes such as the American Center, Russian Center or Alliance, etc. I had started in the advertising agency at a pretty young age soon after leaving school. But then I wasn't happy at my job. I was also writing film criticism and reviews in various newspapers at that time. But my main thing was cinema and somehow I wanted to get involved in the film industry. First I went to an international film festival in Kerala. That was my very first experience outside of the country. Then later on I applied to study cinema at the Pune Film Institute. And I was selected. I thought without studying cinema, it's not possible to get involved. I didn't want to go and work as an assistant director or simply join the industry. I'm a more creative person, so I'm not an assistant director or organizing person, so I thought of myself an artist and also I had a pretty good job at advertising industry. So I thought I could invest whatever my savings were into a proper education. Then I applied for scholarships to France to study cinema. That's how I went to France and studied cinema. After that I came back to Sri Lanka as a professional filmmaker after winning an award in Cannes. That's how I started.

Hasantha  
Dissanayake

*The film *The Forsaken Land*, directed by you, has been acclaimed at several world famous film festivals, including the Cannes Film Festival. But the film was censored in Sri Lanka. Why do you think that happened?*

Vimukthi  
Jayasundara

*The Forsaken Land* was my first feature film. Before that, I did another documentary film called *The Land of Silence*. It's a black and white film. My research on film production at that time was the war and peace in Sri Lanka. That we had a civil war in Sri Lanka for about 30 years, and then it ended in 2009. So in 2004, the ceasefire was announced between LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces, and my research was much based on that. So I wrote a screenplay based on that, assuming that peace will come one day because the ceasefire was such an important event at that time. There were a lot of peace talks happening at the time. When I was writing my screenplay, the government was for peace. When I was making the film, it was still the same government. But when I was completing the film, the government changed and the next government went to war.

So when I came back, after winning the award from Cannes, the Sri Lankan situation had already changed. I didn't change anything myself, but the government changed positions. When I was filming, I had permission from the military and I didn't do any sort of tricks to deceive them in anything. I went straight away with my screenplay. And for the filming,

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

the military even supported us giving their vehicles. We rented out their stuff because of the ceasefire, and also the film itself was based on the ceasefire. But unfortunately, when I came back the situation here had completely changed. The people in the South were completely in support of the war, and they really wanted the war to happen.

I explained to people as much as I could, but people did not want to listen to me. And then the government didn't directly censor the film, but the censor board proposed that I make two cuts to the film. I refused to accept it. So then the debate started, and the National Film Corporation did not allow film to screen for a while. Because I didn't accept the censored version. Then we had to file a case against the Film Corporation, but we didn't win it. So in the end we had to exclude the film from screening. That's what happened.

**Hasantha**  
**Dissanayake**

*You have directed several international co-productions like *The Forsaken Land*, *Between Two Worlds*, and *Chatrak*. How did you get the opportunity to direct such international co-productions, and how was your experience?*

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

My first feature film won an award in Cannes. Of course it's something very important for a filmmaker to win an award in Cannes. Luckily it was my first feature film. So it has succeeded in attracting much international attention throughout the world. I had many proposals coming from different parts of the world, but of course I could not accept many. One reason was I was very young and I was very worried about taking on a lot of different projects. Because some of those were very commercial projects. The projects that I accepted were close to what I had done earlier with my first feature.

So I decided to work on those other two projects that you mentioned, *Between Two Worlds* and *Chatrak*.

Of course it's not easy, I must say, because sometimes when you make your first feature, there will be more commercial work available than your art projects. So if somebody really wants to do your art films, you have to make an effort to do it. You have to tell the producing community that you are only interested in arthouse films. Then if you succeed in a festival like Cannes, Berlin or another big festival, many projects will come to you aiming for commercial success. That's also how they get directors for their project. They're waiting for some good director to emerge, and they will offer many projects. So at that time I was very straightforward. I decided to go into art projects. It was a bit of a challenge as there is usually no big budget for arthouse projects.

But for *Between Two Worlds*, my second feature, I successfully got a lot of support. It was a Sri Lankan-French co-production. It took a while as I had to travel and convince many people to support the project, because *Between Two Worlds* is quite a big production compared to the other productions I have done. It has horses, it has helicopters, it has many things. The film was shot all over the country for about 65 days, it's a pretty big production. So I took part in many pitching forums, and it took about two years of pitching and discussions to get the budget that I wanted to have.

*Chatrak* was a co-production and I got an invitation from a producer in India. It happened during a Facebook chat. Back then Facebook was something new. So while I was chatting with someone, he suggested to me that I come to India and make a film. I wondered if that

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

was possible, because at that time Facebook was not that serious. So it happened through a fun chatting and he invited me immediately the following week. I went there and I had a check in my hand to do whatever I wanted. So I wrote a screenplay, I shot the film. I edited the film. I did the film within about four months. And at the end of the four months we successfully went to Cannes again at the Directors Fortnight. Those two films happened very rapidly and went smoothly compared to today's situation. So that's how I got involved in international co-productions.

**Hasantha**  
**Dissanayake**

*I recently read an article you wrote about the film *Between Two Worlds*. It stated that the film had a reading of the current political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. But it could not be screened in Sri Lanka. What about the basic philosophical concept of the film, and why could it not be screened?*

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

Good question. My second feature film *Between Two Worlds* was based entirely on my own personal experience of the youth who wanted to change the country. But they always faced violence and repression and were ultimately defeated. So I was doing research and a lot of reading on that, and then I realized that many things happened in the past. In 1971, we had armored struggle against the government. It was defeated totally. And then in 1989 we had the South's armed struggle against the government and that was also defeated. Then if you look at the parallel history in the North, it's the same thing. The Northern youth took up arms against the government, and it became a very Fascist movement later on. However, I realized that youth have been fighting for change all the time in this country. But each and every time, when they arrive they were defeated very violently and thrown out. So I saw a kind of repetition of that. It happens every ten to twenty years.

Then I wanted to find out what is happening. There is such a radical and brilliant youth that come and question about their government, systems, rules and principles, whatever. Everything that is wrong in this country and that they want to change. But unfortunately, when they launch their opinions, it is very peaceful at the very beginning, each and every protest. If you look at it historically, when youth movements arise, they are very positive. But later it gets channeled through violent leadership, and then it suddenly becomes a big military movement. And then suddenly it also gets crushed and defeated. I joined that idea with a futuristic revolution that will happen in Sri Lanka.

Actually, what is happening right now in Sri Lanka in 2022 is a technological revolution. The youth are rising up with technology, not through armed struggle. Actually it's a digital struggle. When I was making *Between Two Worlds*, the internet and social media were not as popular as today. I made the film in 2007. The current situation, if you look at it, is pretty close to what was reflected and discussed in the film. But unfortunately, this film has not been released yet. It's not only censorship, there are other reasons like lack of support from the National Film Corporation, because the film is not very commercial. The film is very conceptual. Up until now I have not been able to release the film. So I think now it's time to release it, so that people can relate it to much more than ever before.

**Hasantha**  
**Dissanayake**

*Many say that the Sri Lankan film industry is in crisis. Some people also say that cinema in Sri Lanka is not an industry. What do you think about these comments?*

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

Industry means a machinery or a kind of factory-type model that provides supply. There is a supply chain produced through a system, plus various artistic and technical scientific contributions. At the end, there's a product. So that is what we can call an industry. Whether it's a coconut industry or rice industry or whatever. There has to be a demand and supply, and then there's a product that has been delivered. Also, there are people who make a living through the industry. People who work full time, professionally surviving through the industry. If you look at all those elements, we do have an industry model for cinema. We have a lot of people who survive through cinema, and people who believe in cinema as an industry. They look upon cinema as their livelihood.

Not only cinema, but every other industry in Sri Lanka is in crisis. But the film industry is number one in such a crisis. We have a lot of crises as a country now. We had a glorious time in cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. But when the models changed after the advent of television, it was a disaster. I recognize cinema as an industry in a way, but I also recognize cinema as an art medium. So we need to find a connection between them, because cinema is not just an art industry. But we can also call it an art industry. The cinema industry produced art, but some people do not like art to be an industrial product. They think that cinema art is more spiritual, like a poet or painter. So I like to see myself as a poet or a painter. But the problem is I need much more than a pen and a brush. If you want to be a poet, you only need to use a pen for that. So you can call yourself a poet. But film is not like that, film requires trained technicians to support you through various roles. And so it can't happen suddenly, they have to be there when you decide to make a film.

It's because cinema is a technological product. It happens through the advancement of the technology industry. So I think cinema is definitely an industry like any other. But there is a strong component that supports art. Because of that, Sri Lankan cinema needs support as an art form from the government or other sectors. But at the same time, we have an industry which has to be sustained by itself, making commercial products to attract large audiences into our cinemas. That's very important. So I think we need to have both segments, art and commercial productions. And even if it is an art film, it has to be commercially viable in the cinema to some extent. It may not be a box office success, but at least it should appeal to some of the audience to be successful in cinema. So that you can keep producing the same thing or even better films afterwards. I think we can call cinema an industry, but it is an art industry with a controversial side.

**Hasantha**  
**Dissanayake**

*The film industry is a major part of the economy in many countries. But in Sri Lanka it is different. Do you believe that the film industry can help solve the economic crisis in Sri Lanka?*

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

Of course, when you say the economy, it's not only a few industries, every other industry has to contribute in a healthier way to boost the economy. The film industry is one of them. Cinema has been a very important industry in this country during our glorious time. But unfortunately in the recent past, perhaps if you look back a few decades now, Sri Lankan cinema is not an industry strong enough to sustain itself. Because it has not been updated with new technology, it has taken so long to bring about a digital transformation in this country. We could show 35mm back then, and now we have digital technology, but not the same standards everywhere. Every cinema hall has its own way of showing movies. Some are completely digital, some are analog. Cinema is definitely an

**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

evolving industry. It has always evolved due to technological advancement. Because cinema is a technological industry, it must go on the same journey with the rest of the world.

Whatever new is coming, we must implement it immediately. We can't wait for a long time. Once we have a gap of two or three years, we buy more equipment and it's already outdated. So that's what's happening here. It is too late when we decide to digitize film technology. It becomes something new in the world. Therefore, it is important to identify the local film industry if it is to contribute to a healthy economy. I don't know if we have any research on how much we contribute to the economy here. I don't know if there are accurate statistics about it, different people say different things. But the Film Corporation does not have an annual report and they do not study commerce. That needs to change. So I think we can definitely contribute. The Sri Lankan economy can definitely get a boost from the film industry if it's treated well with the intention of implementing new technology.

Younger filmmakers especially are so desperate to make films, and they're very good at making short films. But once they complete their short films, it's very complicated to go to the next level to make their first feature and be successful. You can make your first feature because the technology is now available, you can hire a camera, you can get your crew and you can do it. But once you make a feature film, where are you going to show it? And the Film Corporation is not providing support for them to do that. So it's quite unfortunate.

Therefore, it's very important that you and the younger generation get involved in policy making to change this system. In particular, to amend the Constitution of the Film Industry and the National Film Corporation Act, which have not been updated to be in line with world standards. So if you can do that, it will definitely be a success story for our economy. I hope we succeed in the end.

**Hasantha**  
**Dissanayake**  
**Vimukthi**  
**Jayasundara**

*Finally, do you have any message or advice for emerging filmmakers?*

Vimukthi Jayasundara: Filmmaking has changed over the years. When I was in film school, what we have learned, the basic filmmaking skills are the same. It's kind of a language. So you learn a language through the technology, how to use a camera, how to do editing techniques. And so the language is the same. Yet the way you tell your story, where you express your cinematic style, maybe that is changing from time to time. And back in the days we had the glory of showing in a big cinema, that was our main thing. We never happy to show our films on television. But now streaming has become more important than anything else. Quite a lot of industrial norms and practices have been changed by streaming. The length of a film has changed. Now it can be many hours. It's not one and a half hours maximum. It can be three, 4 hours. And it can come in the form of a TV series. Netflix or Amazon Prime have many series like that. But it gives a good cinematic experience too.

You have to have a very open mind to explore cinema in different ways. But at the same time it is very important to learn the basics of cinema from history. If you do not have a taste for cinema, you do not have a special taste that can make people feel emotion.

Because in the end the human psyche is about psychology, if you can not make people emotional, if you can not connect with people intellectually, you have no connection with people. So that's why it's important that you need to see all the movies to learn how cinema has evolved from the past, from the Lumiere Brothers' short films to whatever short films are being made now. So see how technological advancement has come about through history, watch all the films and how they changed technology, how editing has changed throughout history. Devote yourself to consciously learn all this, and then come up with something new. Because we may have a chance to repeat some time. There are a lot of successful remakes happening now. Because the old content can be newly presented now in a different way. As human beings, we are experiencing the same cycle over and over again. So it's not necessarily that they have to have an original version. But even in bringing things from the past, you have to be open minded for the future as well.

You also have to be able to watch a few movies a day. You can't be tired of watching movies. That's very important. I can say my good point is that I'm able to watch a movie whether it's good or bad, long or short – it does not matter to me. I am able to sit and go through the film till the end. I want to see the end, because it's a process involving creativity within the time period that they have. How they managed to convince you through time. So that you need to learn it by heart, you need to learn it through the experience. By reading about it and watching movies.

So without watching movies in a normal way and all the new ways, you will not able to understand this medium. If you want to speak one particular language, you need to speak that language a lot, you need to read a lot. Also cinema is a language, so if you want to study about filmmaking and do something, you have to read about cinema and watch as many movies as you can. You have to practice cinema. There is no other way to study it. If you do less than that, then you may have highly advanced technology, you may have an interactive computer with a lot of things. But you may not have a cinematic eye, cinematic mode, cinematic editing and cinematic emotion that can affect people.

- 15 May, 2022

by

**Hasantha Prabhoothi Dissanayake (hasanthadissanayake6@gmail.com)** is a student filmmaker from Galle city located in the Southern region of Sri Lanka. He completed his graduation in BA (Honours) in Film and Television with a first-class at University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. He made a few fiction short films and documentary films as a director, producer and screenwriter. He has won several international awards for his short films. He is working as an assistant director in the Sri Lankan film industry as well. He is a fellow of the 2022 International Film Business Academy at Busan Asian Film School in South Korea.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# KUO MING-JUNG

Festival Programmer

Taiwan

Interview by Tami Xu Qian-Chun

Kuo Ming-Jung has been active in the film industry for more than a decade since graduating with a degree in journalism. She worked in distribution and production for some time, and after returning from the UK full of passion for cinema, she devoted herself to festival management, programming, and film criticism. During her position as curator at the Taipei Film Festival, Ming-Jung did not only bring new aspects to the original film programs but also developed programs such as the producer workshop *Produire au Sud Taipei* which emphasizes script development and international co-production; and *In Progress: VR*, comprised of a hackathon, panels, and screenings. Ming-Jung has served on several juries and selection committees including Open Doors of the Locarno Film Festival, Golden Horse Awards & Film Festival, and International Film Festival Rotterdam, and was a program consultant for the Singapore International Film Festival from 2017 to 2018. Later Ming-Jung joined SGIFF as artistic director till 2020. She is now a program consultant for Taiwan International Human Rights Film Festival.

NOTE: The following text was written by Tami Xu Qian-Chun following her interview with Kuo Ming-Jung.

As a festival curator from Taiwan who has collaborated with various international programmers, producers, and filmmakers, Kuo Ming-Jung is a person who always tries to look for innovative new methods for film festivals and the industry. She has discovered that there can be opportunities for anyone with diverse specialties to join the film industry as a creative producer; such specialties are helpful for gathering together a variety of projects, exchanging one's experiences, as well as stimulating ideas so as to bring more new concepts to the future audience. She thinks that the film industry and co-production are still in progress of developing all over the world. With new technologies and the pandemic spreading out globally, no one knows what will be the exact answers to every question and problem we are going to face. There should be an ongoing learning and sharing experience among film workers, and decentralization is a crucial concept when filmmakers co-produce projects across continents.

However, Ming-Jung's observation in the past few years is that filmmakers or producers are more conservative and traditional when they meet variations in the industry of Taiwan. It's been a long while since any masterpieces from the Taiwanese film industry were showcased in major film festivals – this issue may come from the fear of stepping out of the island because of a lack of bilingual capacity, the funding selection system based on the *Guanxi* network, or the loss of film reviews to set decent or neutral comments on Taiwanese films to improve better projects in the recent years. Ming-Jung wishes to provide her professional experiences and knowledge through her participation in those programs, as young filmmakers and producers have the potential to engage the creative projects with universal perspectives.

The initial idea of organizing a film festival was a platform for the assembly of marketing strategies, especially for films that had less commercial components than artistic ones. Red carpets or galas are events that help filmmakers gain more investors and audiences. Film festivals play an important role in the film industry with their networking system, and there is also an educational role played by film seminars, and even more panels. The spread of digital technology has been rising, filmmaking has become easier for amateurs, and more and more festivals are held to present all sorts of films. Many film festivals explore the possibilities of finding initiatives and certain themes for each festival. Ming-Jung shared her input in operating networking panels with young filmmakers whose films were selected for the International New Talent Competition when she worked for Taipei Film Festival. She says she wanted to help young filmmakers to communicate and exchange ideas without following the “industry rules”, and this limitation was compounded by the patriarchy of the industry. This hasn't make much progress during the film sector boom in Taiwan in the recent decade. “We hope to gather the younger generation to drive youth empowerment on their own, to defy the stricture that only their seniors can be the instructors. But frankly speaking, there is no certainty in this field, everything can be possible,” said Ming-Jung.

After many years of working on festival selection committees and reading many projects, Ming-Jung talked about the obstacles for Taiwanese projects to be seen on the international platforms. Taiwanese filmmakers or producers have to explore the regulations and system in the global film market, to learn how to survive and become competitive. It is essential to build partnerships with trust, accumulating credits in various festivals, workshops, and forums. To refine the projects with strong storytelling

and structure, the younger generation needs to stand out to voice their openness and liberty for themselves. It will also be momentous progress for the industry if discrimination or the patriarchal structure can be eliminated, and bring more female perspectives to film projects. "We should create more opportunities and space for female creators and producers to talk about their stories without being disturbed by others' cynicism," Ming-Jung added. "Of course, this is an issue not just in the film sector, but in the entire society." How to solve these problems are part of the filmmakers' tasks for the future.

- 17 May, 2022

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

**by** **Tami Xu Qian-Chun (tamixuprod@gmail.com)** is an independent filmmaker and producer who has established her creative style in Paris and Beijing. She participated in some notable Chinese film productions such as *The Shadow Play* (dir. Lou Ye), *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain* (dir. Gu Xiao-Gang), and *When Night Falls* (dir. Ying Liang). She was also selected for *Berlinale Talents*, *Tokyo Talents* (2013), *Produire au Sud Taipei* (2018), and *Kaohsiung VR Film Lab - Project Market* (2020), pursuing a career worldwide. Her projects focus on humanities and social issues.



# DENNIS WU

Chairman of Bole Film / VIESHOW Cinemas  
Taiwan

Interview by Ping-Yu CHIU

Dennis WU was born in 1972 and graduated from National Cheng-chi University (NCCU) with a degree in advertising. He is the Chairman of Bole Film and VIESHOW cinemas. He is also the Managing Director of CMC Entertainment and CMC movie. Prior to that, Denis has served as Marketing Director of 20th Century Fox Taiwan Branch and Marketing Promotions Coordinator for Chanel. He is known in the film industry in Taiwan as “A reassuring force for Taiwan Cinema”.

Bole Film is a flagship film company established in 2020 in Taiwan with strong shareholders consisting of a government fund and Taiwan's top four cinema chains, focusing on film production, financing and film distribution, and expanding its business in the Mandarin language speaking market.

VIESHOW Cinemas is currently the market leading cinema operator in Taiwan. The circuit operates 16 sites of 165 screens with 38% market share.

CMC Entertainment is one of the firms affiliated to CMC. This company is mainly responsible for film distribution, program filming, and commercial broadcasting.

## Part 1. General

Ping-Yu CHIU

*How did you start in the industry?*

Dennis WU

I entered the film industry by accident. Film marketing is my 3rd job. Before that, I was working in a department store, and then Chanel, both in the marketing department. After I left Chanel, I wanted to go abroad to study communication. At that time, the marketing director of the 20th Century Fox Taiwan Branch - I met her in my first job when I was working in Zhong-Xing Department Store - told me that they are hiring a marketing freelancer. I thought it would be good for me to work part-time while preparing my exam for studying abroad. So, I submitted my CV, and I was very lucky to be selected for the job, eventually I found it interesting.

Ping-Yu CHIU

*What is the reason for you to stay in the film industry?*

Dennis WU

I studied advertising when I was in college. One thing I found interesting in film marketing is that every film is a unique product. Marketing for ordinary products requires long-term and consistent strategy, but for films, we have to build a unique method based on each film's specific situation and its audience group.

So, it is exciting. Marketing people always say that film is a “one-shot product”, which means, if we fail in the beginning, there is no second chance. The experience is quite special for me, as every time is a whole new challenge, so I decided to stay.

## Part 2. Film Marketing & Distribution

Ping-Yu CHIU

*In terms of marketing, what is the difference between marketing for film and for a department store or Chanel?*

Dennis WU

Marketing for a department store is a routine duty. I was actually at service for the vendors. I had to coordinate joint promotional events, including anniversaries and special holiday activities. Those activities were based on the calendar, so it was basically the same every year.

As for Chanel, I was in charge of the new products launch campaigns, and the display of counters and windows at department stores. The headquarters would send us a bible, with detailed instructions of how to maintain consistency in product display. Because this is a multinational corporation, a global brand, the flexibility is limited. It allows you to add a little bit of your own creativity, but everything still needs to match the brand image. Unlike films, if a campaign did not work well, I still had another chance or another event to adjust it. It was a stable job, and a good experience on my CV. But I became bored after a while, because in a multinational corporation like Chanel, I didn't have the chance to be creative.

Ping-Yu CHIU

*It is interesting that you mentioned a multinational corporation, as your next job was at 20th Century Fox.*

Dennis WU

Indeed. However, when I was at 20th Century Fox, it was the early 2000s, after the

**Dennis WU**

success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Most of the films I worked on that time were big-budget Chinese-language films. Of course, the headquarters would still give us a marketing kit for each film, but films are culture content products, so 20th Century Fox would still authorize us to adjust it for the local market.

People from different cultures watch films differently, so you have to localize your marketing strategy, to find the unique selling point, to tell your audience why this movie is worth watching. 20th Century Fox allowed me to have some space for creativity, that was the fun part.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*During your time at 20th Century Fox, you have hosted a number of large scale and creative premieres. Which premiere event that you have been involved in - either by doing or attending- is most memorable for you?*

**Dennis WU**

The most memorable one, and also my favorite premiere event, was the one for *House of Flying Daggers* held in the National Palace Museum. All the stars attended. You know that stars are difficult, not to mention their agents. The communication, the rundown, itinerary... the whole plan had to be solid. The entire event was in the National Palace Museum theme, including staff and performers, all dressed like in the Tang Dynasty, to make the audience feel that they were back in the era of the movie.

The biggest challenge for me was to apply for the permit for this venue. I had to convince a public entity to agree to host a commercial event. After the experience at the National Palace Museum, I went to Bitan Scenic Area to host the premiere of *Red Cliff*. Go big or go home, right?

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Taiwanese films often have limited marketing budgets; do you think successful marketing can be done on a limited budget?*

**Dennis WU**

It depends on the type of the film. *House of Flying Daggers* and *Red Cliff* are not Taiwanese films. The budget, the cast, everything is on a different level.

I am not saying that we cannot do that for Taiwanese films, but after all, the market for Taiwanese films is not mature, yet. So of course marketers will be more cautious in making the marketing investments.

For small and mid-budget films in Taiwan, the current marketing trend is more audience-based. For example, the filmmakers and casts will go to cinemas and meet the audience before or after screenings, in order to create a connection with the consumers directly.

Film marketing needs to be well planned in its early stages. You must first understand your product. Planning with the filmmaker before shooting will get you twice the result with half the effort. Otherwise, without adequate discussion with the filmmaker, there is no way to catch the essence of the content. If you only do the planning after the film is done, you will waste more time and energy, and the costs for communication will be more.

The most successful case I have worked on in recent years is *Little Big Women*. We (Bole Films) started to do the overall marketing planning at a very early stage, and we actually

**Dennis WU**

went through all the marketing strategies, positioning, and materials design with the director before the filming even started.

For Taiwanese films, the marketing budget is not the higher, the better. It depends on the genre and the production. A while ago, the Minister of Culture said that he hoped that Taiwanese films can be made on a larger scale. He planned to initiate the National Development Funds to support high-budget productions, which I would love to see happen. With government funding, filmmakers can be bolder in their attempts to do larger, different types of films, which is ideal for larger-scale marketing campaigns.

At the time when I was in 20th Century Fox, every time I got a marketing bible, I would adapt it to the local market. This step is very important, when you make marketing plan for a product, you must have your market in mind. This is what I see from the film industry in Taiwan recently, more and more people are starting to do pre-marketing planning for films, which is good, and there are more successful cases these days.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*At what point should the producer contact the marketing team?*

**Dennis WU**

We (Bole Film) started the marketing planning for *Little Big Women* at the time when we got the script and decided to invest in the project. Now Bole Film is continuing this model.

If we don't lead the project development, and the filmmaker has already developed it before coming to us, we will still give suggestions on the script. If we confirm to participate, our marketing team will communicate with the filmmaker thoroughly, then let the filmmaker focus on production. We will take care of the whole marketing planning.

The latest moment to pitch your film to us is before shooting. No need to come to us if it is a final cut. I am not saying it is impossible – as a matter of fact, in the past most Taiwanese films started the marketing planning the after final cut. But at this stage, it is somewhat difficult for the distribution team, as it is already too late to do any adjustment. We can only work on what we have and hope for the best.

The marketing team is always the first one to be blamed when a movie is not doing well at the box office, but that's really unfair. The most critical factor is the quality of the film, and the collaboration between the production team and the marketing team, which decides if the film fits the market.

Of course, everything I am talking about is for commercial films. If it is an auteur film, it is not part of this discussion. Those films are the creator's artistic expression, so we the marketer will not interfere.

**Part 3. Cinemas**

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*In the era of digitization, how can cinemas encourage consumers to engage in offline social activities such as going to the cinema together?*

**Dennis WU**

It depends on the definition of "social activities". Can we consider a virtual meeting as a

**Dennis WU**

social event? Why can't people stay at their home forever? Because real face-to-face social contact is still different from the one on a digital device. Physical gathering is hard to replace.

I have always been telling my team that VIESHOW is not just a cinema, because VIESHOW can have many different possibilities. In addition to film screenings, VIESHOW actually has many diverse contents. During the pandemic, we held investment seminars, and the Golden Horse Masterclasses. So, it can be intellectual, it can be cultural, it can be entertaining. VIESHOW is a place with a diverse social scene, a place that provides great service, and a place people can come to fulfil a variety of needs. VIESHOW now even has live performances in the cinema, which is an idea I have been promoting for about two to three years before it was realized.

The social experience, which takes place in a physical venue, is, in my opinion, still hard to replace. What I would like to do is to provide more diverse services, make VIESHOW become an ideology or a symbol of perception.

In the future, VIESHOW will start to manage some old cinemas with historical significance, such as the old local cinema in Yilan, the Li Ze Cinema – which is not showing movies now – or the Shengping Cinema in Jiufen. If VIESHOW survives this pandemic well, we will have more power to discuss with the Ministry of Culture on how to improve the cultural and creative aspects regarding cinemas operation.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Have cinemas or distributors tried to extend the theatrical window for Taiwanese films?*

**Dennis WU**

During the pandemic, the theatrical window has been shortened, it is an unstoppable global trend. For the films I distribute now, the theatrical window is 60-75 days. It is not likely to be extended.

The cost of 35 mm prints was expensive. Now because of the digitalization of screening technology, the cost of prints has drastically decreased. The result: the numbers of screens of some Hollywood films is considerable, and 60%-70% of the box office will come from the first and the second week. So, it is not necessary to extend the theatrical window.

If the movie is one of those phenomenal movies that has the long tail box office income because of word-of-mouth, we will probably set a longer window. But this is not a common case. In general, a 60-day window is sufficient.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Is it possible for cinema chains in Taiwan to offer an unlimited movie pass like French cinema chains?*

**Dennis WU**

It is hard. Unfortunately, cinema chains in Taiwan are relatively disadvantageous in terms of negotiating with Hollywood studios. About 70%-80% of the box office in Taiwan is from studio films, so U.S. distributors are extremely powerful when making deals with cinema chains. Doing business with U.S. distributors is like having their hands on our throat. We have to get their approval for everything, such as the split ratio, or the rate for promotional events. Do you know each cinema chain can only collaborate with three

**Dennis WU**

credit card companies? Even our pricing needs to be approved by them.

In France, the local French films have a much bigger market share, so the French cinema chains have the upper hand, and they can do whatever they want, such as the unlimited movie pass.

Let's take one step at a time. Start with increasing Taiwanese films' market share, then we can have more power in the negotiations with the U.S. distributors. If we have equally popular products from our own country, we don't need to worry about the threat from Hollywood.

**Part 4. Film Investment**

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*When making film investment decisions, how important is the genre?*

**Dennis WU**

There are not that many different genres in Taiwanese films. We are not there yet. Of course, there are some genres that are popular among Taiwanese audiences and have many successful cases. Those genres are safer for sure, but genre is not a guarantee for box-office success.

At present, Taiwanese filmmakers are still making attempts in various genres. As the Taiwanese audience has been influenced by Hollywood films for a long time, they have certain ideas of what is a movie supposed to look like. The films that require a big budget and large-scale production, are still an off-limits territory for us, because there is no way to compete with Hollywood films.

Therefore, Taiwanese films should focus on dramas or other safer genres, and finish the films on a limited budget, to have better opportunities to achieve box office success.

For now, we will make attempts cautiously. Before the success of *Little Big Women*, we didn't have this kind of family drama become commercially profitable in Taiwan. Now there are several filmmakers making films in this genre, and aiming for the commercial market.

For me, it's boring to keep doing films in the same genre. Bole Films has a commitment to the Taiwanese film industry. The Ministry of Culture approached us, because they believe that Bole has the ability to integrate resources in order to develop more opportunities and possibilities. Bole is indeed looking for projects with commercial potential, but we are not limited by the genre of the films.

If we see a project with potential, but it is not a familiar genre, we may use our experience, and judgment, to advice and communicate with the filmmaker on how to adjust the story to increase the opportunities for the project, and eventually have this film made. This is what we are trying and working on now. With a more experienced team to do the overall product planning, the risk of investment can be limited.

Bole has positioned itself as a resource integration platform. The shareholders in Bole are

**Dennis WU**

cinema chains and distributors. They have experience in film marketing, investment, financing and collaborations with public entities. Integrating experience and resources to help filmmakers who do not have such resources, is the main purpose of Bole.

We want to help filmmakers from the development stage, assist them in polishing the scripts, and then turn it into films. Or if it is a project that has already been developed, we can help them to identify the problem, to find the opportunity, to manage and control the budget. We can help them to find more resources, including sponsorship money for product placement, or public funding from local governments, so that these filmmakers can focus on their creative work. Not to mention distribution, as long as the film is made, we can assist them from scheduling, distribution, and even the copyright sales. It is one-stop.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*As a strategic investor, do you participate in the creative decisions of the film?*

**Dennis WU**

We do. Basically, we respect filmmakers' creative initiative, but we will tell them what can be adjusted from a commercial perspective. I believe that the filmmakers who come to us are aware of our position, so there was not that much of a problem in communication.

It is impossible for us to tell an auteur director such as Tsai Ming-Liang to revise his script. Likewise, he will not come to us to ask for funds. Everyone's goals have to be aligned before we can cooperate. In general, Bole will respect the filmmaker's decisions and we will not ask them to cooperate with unreasonable demands.

Because we have investment from the National Development Fund, they insist that we don't affect filmmakers' creative decisions in order to meet the requirements of "certain markets". We are absolutely conscientious about that. While doing a risk assessment for a film, Bole does not include revenues from "certain markets", especially those with strict censorship.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Does the National Development Fund require films to protect the image of our government? Is it possible for a film to criticize the Taiwanese government, but still be invested in by Bole?*

**Dennis WU**

Of course, they can tell whatever story they want to tell. There is only one board member representing the National Development Fund, and what they are paying attention to is solely the operation of the company. The Fund will not interfere in the films we make.

## **Part 5. Film Industry Situation**

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*With the disappearance of mid-budget movies and the polarization of the movie market, how can Taiwanese mid-budget movies increase their market share?*

**Dennis WU**

The market polarization and the disappearance of mid-budget movies is mainly happening to Hollywood movies. In Taiwan, the local box-office success cases are all mid-budget movies. Because of the rise of international streaming platforms, many Hollywood mid-budget movies are no longer screening in cinemas. It becomes a chance

**Dennis WU**

for local mid-budget movies. This is the reason why Bole decided to invest in mid-budget movies.

If the cost is properly controlled, a mid-budget local movie can make a profit with a box office of NT\$40 million to 100 million. Those local movies can also make up the loss from the absence of the Hollywood mid-budget movies.

A local mid-budget movie has its locality and topicality to make it sensational. At the same time, Hollywood mid-budget movies are popcorn movies, but they do not screen in places selling popcorn anymore. Without the competition, local movies can stand firmly on their own feet.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Taiwanese films' market share is currently around 10%, what is the percentage goal in the future?*

**Dennis WU**

The goal is 25-30%. That is a possible number. Undeniably we don't have a local films protection law because Taiwan is a member of the WTO. It is already too late for the discussion of implementing such protection, the Taiwanese audience have seen too many movies throughout the years.

It is more crucial to make genuine high-quality films, rather than protection. The market mechanism matters. Nowadays, each Taiwanese film easily gets 50-60 screens on the first week, because there are too many cinemas. Cinemas are being supportive. The key is the confidence from the audience.

Because of the establishment of Taiwan Creative Content Agency, collaborations between the government and enterprises are being encouraged. Together we will be able to elevate the general production quality, and reinforce the audience's confidence in Taiwanese films.

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*Why would Bole Films assume that the overall box office will grow after the market share of Taiwanese films increases?*

**Dennis WU**

We made that assumption based on experience. In the early 2010s, many local films contributed to the total market revenue. At that time the box office in Taiwan was up to 12 billion NTD, which was 2 billion more than today.

The core moviegoer in Taiwan is interested in watching Hollywood movies, not Taiwanese movies. On the other hand, some of Taiwanese films' audience will not watch Hollywood films. Some audiences don't want to watch foreign films as long as they have to read subtitles. In my opinion, the elevation of Taiwanese films will develop a new audience, and increase the frequency of moviegoing. There are all kinds of audiences, and they only care if your product fits them.

For example, *Little Big Women* attracted many older generation audiences, who are not traditional movie-goers. This is where the opportunities are for Taiwanese films.

In our long-term observation, I am convinced that only by increasing the market share of

**Dennis WU**

Taiwanese films, can we boost the entire box office revenue. My projection of the increase is fairly conservative, considering the global tendency of the decline of mid-budget movies, however we still hope Taiwanese films' box office can at least make up the loss, and keep the total revenue above 10 billion.

**Part 6. Achievement**

**Ping-Yu CHIU**

*What would you say is your greatest achievement in life or in your career?*

**Dennis WU**

Last year was the 100th anniversary of the founding of Taiwan Culture Association. The Ministry of Culture selected 90 people in the cultural industry and awarded them a medal, and I was one of the 90. During the award ceremony, they gave me a title, "A reassuring force for Taiwan Cinema". That is a huge affirmation for me and my work.

Since I started working in films, I have worked on all sorts of films. Sometimes the box office was miserable, sometimes the director was difficult. But I try to help whenever I can, I never say no. My belief is that if you don't give someone a chance, how do you know if they can succeed? Especially when you have so many resources at your hand, you should not be stingy, you should share what you have with those who need them.

This is a principle that I have had for a long time, that you can dislike a film, but you can't discredit the filmmaker. When you have so many resources, you should share them with people. I am proud that my works has been recognized.

*- May 10, 2022*

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

by

**Ping-Yu CHIU (pingutopia11@gmail.com)** started her career as a production coordinator in many feature films and documentaries in Taiwan. Since 2017 she has served as the International Development Manager of Taipei Film Commission. She conceptualizes and implements international marketing strategies for Taipei's film industry. She also represents the Commission in film markets around the globe. In addition, she also serves as the Head of Programs at Taipei Film Academy, which has proven to be one of the most promising film talent training programs within the region. She is now an independent producer.



# YEH JU-FENG

Executive Producer of Mandarin Vision

Taiwan

Interview by Huichieh Danielle Yen

Yeh Jufeng is one of the most experienced film producers in Taiwan. Working in the industry since 1993, she has collaborated with renowned directors of different generations and film genres. Yeh is expert in film project development, resource integration, budget control, and international co-production. In 2004, she established Ocean Deep Films. With a unique vision, she hopes to continue to gather talents and resources in order to produce high quality films of all genres. She is also devoted to establishing a comprehensive film-producing environment in Taiwan. With more than 20 years of experience in film production, in 2013 she was awarded the Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year Award at the 50th Golden Horse Awards. At present, Yeh is the head of the MandarinVision's production department and the producer of Ocean Deep Films.

Founded in 2012, MandarinVision has been actively involved in film development and production, film distribution, international sales and new media operation. In May 2015, veteran film producer Yeh Jufeng brought her 20 years of experience and knowledge to MandarinVision and officially launched its production department, aiming to create a sound platform for Mandarin directors, producers and investors. It hopes to integrate more powerful resources from all cultural and creative industries, with Mandarin filmmakers as its basis, linking up Asia with the rest of the world, and producing more fascinating and touching works. In March 2016, entertainment veteran Ho Xiu-Qiong was inducted as President of MandarinVision, in hopes of continuing the integration of creative power in the Mandarin world by combining capital, entertainment and media. MandarinVision strives to become a leading multimedia corporation with its professional and systemised operations.

Huichieh Danielle

Yen

Yeh Ju-Feng

*In the beginning of our interview we would like to discuss your journey as a filmmaker.*

To talk about that, I'm going to have to talk for a while... [Laughter fills the room] Because next year... this year is 2022 right? Starting next year I will have been 30 years in the industry, because I started working in 1993. Do you really want me to talk about the past? If so, I really will need to talk for a while... [More laughter]

Huichieh Danielle

Yen

Yeh Ju-Feng

*Well let's start with... Why did you want to start making films?*

Well it all has to do with my youth. When I was young I didn't go to college. I liked films, but making films and liking films are two different things. Instead of college I went to work, and I worked in many different places. In Taiwan at the time small movie parlors were very popular. One of my jobs was at a place where you could rent videos and movies and watch in a private room, and order some drinks for about [US\$2.70]. At the time I didn't know many films, so I didn't know what to suggest to customers, so I started watching more and more films. I began to learn about Italian movies, French movies... Our shop had a large book about all the different film directors. So I grabbed the book, and I saw, "Wow, there are so many classic directors here!" So I started to make categories of the different films based on style and plot, to make recommendations to the customers.

The shop was near National Taiwan University, so many people in film making groups would come in. They came to watch our films, and we would offer exchanges with them. It was at that time my curiosity for the industry was sparked. But back then it was very difficult to get into the business. In 1993 there weren't even 10 films being made per year. After two years of working in the rental shop, I decided to open up my own coffee shop. We went bankrupt after 10 months. So I decided it was time to get back into film again.

While not many films were made, 1993 was still a good year for movies [in Taiwan], for example Ang Lee. Anyway, a three month class had opened up and I went to train as a producer. They offered classes in production, camera operation, direction... At the time I said, "Well, all I can do is production." Truthfully I didn't fully understand what production meant, but I thought, "I will bring all of my experience, and just go to the interview." Well, I was selected to join the program. That year, three teachers from NYC came and taught us about production. All three of them had worked with Ang Lee, and were very experienced producers in independent film circles in New York.

But after the class was over I was unable to get a job, until a friend of mine called and asked if I and some of my classmates wanted to join a Taiwanese Language TV series. To be honest at the time neither of us could speak Taiwanese! Two people who can't speak Taiwanese shot 30 episodes of a Taiwanese language show, and no one taught me anything! How to make budgets, a timeline, nothing! Everything I had to learn on my own. But I decided this is what I must do. It was a lot of very hard work. We only had three people on our production team, and I was the head of my team. In the middle of shooting, the art department decided to quit so I become the person who had to manage the art department, all the while still being a producer.

After that, one director of those six productions invited me to work as a producer to make a short film with them, but I wasn't able to finish it. I left the project as we didn't have

## Yeh Ju-Feng

enough funding, and then I shot a TV series for a year. Later when the short film got enough funding from the government it was decided that it would become a feature film, then the team came and asked me again whether I wanted to get involved. I was very pleased to be part of the crew, so that I can finally make a film.

At that time, the Producer Unit was full so I went to join the Director Unit, but I had no experience there so I started as a script supervisor. At that time I learned what should be done from beginning to end. From preproduction all the way to postproduction. So I worked as a script supervisor in my very first feature film, and then became a line producer in my second one.

Later in 1997 I went to Mainland China to make films, then to London, Paris, Vancouver etc... Most of my films were done abroad, and I spent a lot of that time collecting production experience. In 2004 I decided to open my own production company. From my perspective I believe 2004 was a year of learning and study for Taiwanese film. Why? Because after 2004 so many new directors came onto the scene. This is one of the reasons I wanted to create a new company, so I could help these new directors, and get government grants for them. It's because of this grant that most filmmakers are able to make their first films. Because once you get this government grant, then investors will have confidence in your film. So I believe that having this grant is a great thing, because without it we wouldn't have so many great directors today. They all need a place to start from.

In my career I have been able to meet many new people, and in 2008 I produced 7 different films, all with first time directors. In my opinion making films has no shortcut, you just need to find a good story, a good team, and we have to think together. It doesn't matter to me who finds the story, the important thing is to move people. If it moves me, then I want to do it. The people I worked with before 2010 have all become award winners. We went to Cannes, Venice, Berlin etc... all winning awards. My first award winning production was *Murmur of Youth* which won the Best Actress award at the 1997 Tokyo Film Festival. It was the first time in my life walking a red carpet – I felt so silly!

Now with experience I now know it's important to know which films are suitable for which festivals. All of this comes with experience over time. In the past I would go to any festival we could get into, but now it's important to know which ones are the most suitable. You also begin to remember when the festivals happen. For example, Busan and Tokyo are around the same time every year. It becomes habitual.

## Huichieh Danielle Yen

*After all of this time and experience working in this industry have you ever thought of being a director?*

## Yeh Ju-Feng

I have never wanted to be a director. I think it's because from the start I was trained as a producer. So I have a problem. Whenever I first see a script, the first thing I think about is money. Of course I actually have two schools of thinking in mind, I look at the story. Because I've always loved to read, I love to see the poetry of the story. I want to see the potential of the story, and its limitations. The second time I read it I think of the budget. Usually the budget limits my imagination. But I believe a director isn't supposed to have this limitation. They are meant to have a large space to share their story. But as a

## Yeh Ju-Feng

producer I need to bring them back to reality. This isn't to say I think producers don't need an imagination, of course they must have one, but a producer's job is to help make the directors dream a reality. So I think the biggest difference between a director and producer is that every script must be able to become a reality. It must be realistic to turn it into a filmed work. It's a script and not a novel. You can have the most amazing story involving outer space, but if it requires that you go to space, there is no way to make it. Just keep it on a shelf in your house to enjoy it. But it won't become a film. It's a producer's job to make the director's vision a reality.

As a producer I say that I am behind the scenes pushing everyone to move. I believe a producer is a provocateur of movement. This is their most important job. Because sometimes the director wants to move forward, they will finish writing something and look at you and say, "And what else?" They hope that you will appreciate their work. As if they want me to say something like, "The only person in the whole world who is this special is you!" But from my perspective there is not a single person who can stand up and say they are the 'most special'. Of course you have some sort of special element that can move me!

When creating a story we have to look at what is written. From what is written we can then see what we can create. Then within that 100 to 120 minutes, what is it that we can make a reality. You can write a love story, a horror story. These have all been written before. If you are talking about a love story, we all love in a similar way, but are we able to capture it on a page? But once you have a special element, for me, then it is a new movie. For me, if a script has at least one special element that moves me, it's then that I know that I can make this project. I don't want to create something that has been done before. It has to have at least one thing that makes it special. I'm not going to create anything that has been made before.

I have worked with many directors. These days many directors want to work with me, but if the stories they want to make are similar to what I've done in the past, then I may not be interested.

## Huichieh Danielle Yen Yeh Ju-Feng

*Do you think that current students are facing the same problems that you did in the past?*

I don't. I think the problems are different. Right now the opportunities to make films are so many. Within the last three years we have so many new platforms, you don't even have to think of the length of what you are creating, or getting equipment. I was at the last stage of the New Wave of Taiwanese cinema. At that time Taiwan's film industry was in a recession and there wasn't much opportunity to make films. We didn't have this sort of environment to create this much content. If you want to work in this industry it's not hard, what makes it hard is insisting on something. In this current world it is so easy to just take your phone out and create content. Anyone can call themselves a director, a producer. You can use your iPhone to make a short film. But making a feature film is difficult, and making it good is harder. But you have to remember that it will always be hard when you first start.

But look, I have 29 years of past experience. I can't take what happened in the past and yell at the current generations that, "You have to experience a lot of pain and struggle!"

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

Not a single person would pay attention to us old folks. If I took that attitude and taught a class today speaking in this way, the young generation would play on their phone and say, 'Okay Grandma, say whatever you like, I ain't gonna listen.' So I really don't have a way to apply my past experience to what the current generation is facing, all I can say is the opportunities are vast. So you have to handle these problems by yourself. In the beginning it will be hard. Regardless of what changes, that will never change.

I see people all around me talk about taking vacations. "I want to go to Australia, Europe, etc..." But before I turned 50 I never actually took a vacation. For me my work is my joy, so I didn't feel like I needed a vacation. Besides, through my work I was able to travel. That's how I look at it. That is perseverance. Once I turned 50 I decided, maybe I should just take a vacation, but that's a different story. So I would like to tell the younger generations that they must persevere.

So when they ask me for advice, it's hard for me to say because things are so different. But I do tell them that they have to think clearly about what it is they want to do. Do you want to do movies, commercials, TV shows, short films...? Do you want to be an internet celebrity? This is all up to you, but you must also think, "In 10 years from now, where will my place in the world be?"

When I think about wanting to be a director or producer I feel very proud to be a producer because in the end I am the one who is pushing the hardest to make sure that this story is told. You wouldn't know, but I am there behind the scenes always pushing. So this is the goal that I have set for myself. Once you have a goal for yourself, then you have a path that you can walk on.

I always say that with whatever it is you do. Being a director or producer or whatever, you have to have love. If you don't have love for it, please don't do it. Because if you don't have love, love for the story, love for the project, love for whatever you will believe that being on this road will be very difficult on this road, because you will fight with production, fight with the director, you will want to fight with people because you found so much money for them. Fighting is normal, but if you have love you will be able to overcome it.

**Huichieh Danielle**

**Yen**

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

*Other than finding grant money, do you have any other methods for finding funding?*

In Taiwan directors and creators are very lucky. Because they have the support of government funding. In mainland China they don't have this. In recent years Mainland China is starting to have this funding for script writing. However Mainland China, South Korea, Japan, etc. have their own policies that limit the amount of foreign films that can enter their market. So the vast majority of their population watches their domestic films. Taiwan doesn't have this. Taiwan creates 70-80 films a year, but abroad over 700-800 films are being created.

We have this government funding so we can compete. But learning how to get this government funding is a skill. You have to become practiced in pitching to a committee of nine people. Private investors don't necessarily understand film. So they use this government funding as a barometer on how serious to take your project. Many filmmakers have been to many film markets to pitch, but never got money from it; mainly

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

for visibility of the project which finds ways to help companies get money while gathering credits at the same time.

Attending things like HAF can help with finding international projects that don't require your own development. This is a way that you can get a lot of co-production funding.

**Huichieh Danielle**

**Yen**

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

*What elements do you consider when accepting a new project?*

In order for a film to make money it depends on a lot of circumstances such as what's popular, what season it is, what's happening in the world ... etc... Also, a film that makes a lot of money is not always a film that wins a lot of awards.

The concept must be unique. Currently I would like to adjust my process to create films with more global appeal. In fact I've always thought about the global market and I think that many Taiwanese films have the opportunity to go global. Since 2004 I have been seeking out many different international film festivals and taking notes from other writers, and producers.

In 2010-2022 I started working with more global distributors, and I noticed that there is only a small set of distributors, and they often push a bundle of Taiwanese films all at once in order to display the variety of Taiwanese films all together.

With every film I take notice of the differences, taking note of things like when the posters come out, teasers, filming locations, talking with distributors, does there need to be confidentiality... etc. If you get into the big ones – Cannes, Venice, Berlin – then all the other ones will follow.

**Huichieh Danielle**

**Yen**

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

*What is your process when it comes to casting? What sort of actor are you looking for?*

First and foremost you just focus on the story. Then you will see what actor is suitable for which role. Of course famous or good looking actors are able to help box office sales. But they cost money, and they aren't a 100% guarantee that your project will make its money back.

**Huichieh Danielle**

**Yen**

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

*If you don't have a well known director, actor, etc... How do you find funding?*

You have to control the budget. You can invest your own money. But most importantly you have to sell the story. Let them know the story, and filming is good. You have to convince them. You have to 'win the war.'

**Huichieh Danielle**

**Yen**

**Yeh Ju-Feng**

*How do you feel about filming television series?*

It's too much hard work. Taiwanese TV stations also need to update their system and budgets so they can compete with Netflix, Disney+ etc...

*- April 19, 2022*

2022 AFiS Interview Collection :

# Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

**by HuiChieh Danielle Yen (filmmaker.danielleyen@gmail.com)** is an award-winning producer and actress who produced such films as *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) (Canadian locations), *A Trip with Your Wife* (2021) (Canadian Locations), *Best Sisters Forever* (2021), and *The Yani Tseng Story* (2023).

Yen began her career in the UK, where she honed her skills in fashion and film as a professional model and actor. Her first appearance on screen was a bit role in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* under director J.J. Abrams. “Even though I barely had one line, I knew that it was my destiny to continue working in this field.” Later she became one of SONY Xperia “iCar” global spokespersons. She later served as a commercial director where she was responsible for project development, financing, and investments, as well as managing and auditioning actors such as Robert Knepper and Patrick Schwarzenegger for projects filmed in China.

She returned to Taiwan in 2019, where she produced the theatrical film *Your Name Engraved Herein* (Canadian locations) in collaboration with Oxygen Films, which went on to win the 2020 Golden Horse Award for Best Cinematography and Best Original Film Song. The 2021 short film she produced entitled *Best Sisters Forever*, and the short film she recently co-starred in titled *Tank Fairy* has won many independent film awards globally including the 2022 SXSW Midnight Short Audience Award. In 2020, Yen founded Select Entertainment, an international production company that develops and produces original film/TV/XR content, virtual production, talent management, and production services. Danielle is a BiFan Fantastic Film School 2021 and Busan Asian Film School 2022 fellow.



# PHAN DANG DI

Director / Producer  
Vietnam

Interviewed by Tan Hoang Thong

After graduating from the Faculty of Screenwriting at Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema, Phan Dang Di worked at the Vietnam Cinema Department as a public servant for six years before quitting to become an independent filmmaker. His vision was to establish a team of young directors to create a “New Wave” in Vietnamese cinema.

Di made two short films: *Lotus* (2005) and *When I am 20* (2008), which was the first Vietnamese film selected in the shorts competition at the Venice Film Festival. His long feature script entitled *Adrift* (2009) was filmed by director Bui Thac Chuyen in 2007. The film won the FIPRESCI Prize at the 2009 Venice Film Festival and was nominated for Best Screenplay at the 2010 Asia Film Awards.

Phan Dang Di made *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*, the first feature film in which Di worked as a producer, screenwriter and director in 2009. The film won two prizes at Cannes Critic's Week in 2010. It also won many other awards at various film festivals around the world such as Vancouver, Hong Kong, and Stockholm. Di's second film *Big Father, Small Father And Other Stories...* was the first Vietnamese film selected to enter the Official Competition at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival. Recently, he completed *He Serves Fish, She Eats Flower*, an episode of a mini-series about Asian cuisine and flavors produced by HBO Asia.

Di was also the producer of *Flapping In The Middle Of Nowhere* (2014), a feature directorial debut by Nguyen Hoang Diep. The film won the Critic Award at Critics Week, Venice Film Festival 2014. He is also the producer of *Cu li Never Cries*, the feature debut of Pham Ngoc Lan which was selected to be presented at Cannes L'Atelier 2017 and was also funded by the World Cinema Fund at the 2019 Berlin Film Festival. This film is currently in production.

Besides his career as an independent filmmaker and producer, Di is also a teacher. He taught Film History, Screenwriting, and Directing at Hanoi National University and Ho Chi Minh National University. He founded Autumn Meeting, an annual international cinema event in Da Nang, Vietnam, with the participation of lectures by director Tran Anh Hung, famous Korean cinematographer Kim Hyung-koo, Lee Du-man and a number of activists from the world's most important film festivals and funders.

## Tan Hoang Thong

*You are known among young Vietnamese filmmakers as a pioneer in arthouse film, both as a director and a producer. But both of your recent projects are TV series which were broadcast on commercial entertainment TV channels. Was it your plan to match the reality of current Vietnamese tastes?*

## Phan Dang Di

Not really. Actually, arthouse film is still my first choice. Opportunities for arthouse film in Vietnam have not yet developed as they should, this is a relatively limited point. Plus, the investment for arthouse films usually depends on international sources of capital. If there is any domestic investment capital, the film still faces many challenges getting released. So it's hard for investors to recover their investment. As a producer, I see it as a big challenge for the Vietnamese film market.

Of course, I plan to continue doing arthouse films. As I have just said, I will focus on looking for investors, supporters, and international sources to distribute my film in foreign markets, so I can recover the capital for investors.

But at the same time, I'm also challenging myself with series films, because it is quite easy to get investment. Nowadays, audiences are familiar with VOD, OTT, so I will also try this kind of film with these two popular platforms. During my time making films, I've made good connections with my co-workers both domestic and internationally, as well as some well-known actors and actresses. If I only pursue arthouse film, the period is quite long from the time the project is formed to its completion, so the crew has to wait. In this current era, waiting for a long time is dangerous, especially with my special partners. I think while waiting for arthouse projects to come together, I should start on other projects where everyone can continue to work together.

And there is one more reason, related to the Autumn Meeting program that I am one of the founders of. It was created to train young talents. I want projects like TV series, for example, that can help young filmmakers, especially young actors, have the opportunity to work regularly to practice together what they have learned at Autumn Meeting.

## Tan Hoang Thong

*The potential of Vietnamese cinema is a topic that is often talked about in Vietnamese filmmaking seminars. What are your ideas concerning this potential and how big it is?*

## Phan Dang Di

When talking about potential, this is an overly optimistic concept. From the perspective of someone who has worked in the Vietnamese film industry for a long time, I have been in a management position on the government payroll, an independent filmmaker, a film producer, and have participated in teaching and co-curricular activities. I am also a person with international connections, I go abroad often and understand the international system. Through perspectives like these, I can see clearly that Vietnamese cinema has potential, but I see the outstanding and unresolved challenges faced by Vietnamese cinema with more anxiety than hope.

One of my biggest worries is that there is no clarity in the direction and development strategy of Vietnamese cinema. It lacks a link between the managers and the filmmakers. The contemporary film industry is being operated and developed in a quite fragmented way, whether good or bad. It does not have a long-term strategic vision like other countries' film industries. And in addition, the shortage of high-quality human resources,

**Phan Dang Di**

the shortage of content production staff, as well as the lack of support for smart policies from the government, all mean that Vietnamese cinema does not have a solid foundation on which to develop. I think that when these big problems remain unsolved, from the government's side, the managers do not see cinema as an opportunity, but only see it as an ordinary field. There are still many concerns about censorship and ideology, and the filmmakers themselves lack solidarity. With the lack of guidance from smart policies, Vietnamese cinema will forever stay in the form of potential. It won't have the support it needs to move forward.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Regarding the training of filmmakers in Vietnam, what concerns do you have?*

**Phan Dang Di**

Education and training is currently one of the biggest weaknesses and bottlenecks in Vietnam, hindering it from developing into a strong film industry. The entire film education system belongs to the government. The current lecturers in that system are not the best filmmakers or filmmakers who are very active, or even well-trained ones.

My lecturers were all people who were educated in Russia, their knowledge belonging to the old Communist block. They had studied at quite well-run film schools, so that when they returned home, they had certain advantages as teachers. After that generation of lecturers passed, and the Vietnamese film industry began to develop differently from the past, film schools could no longer attract good lecturers. That's because the environment is not open, not up-to-date, and lacks the basic foundations of curricula, educational philosophy, and connection with the outside world. In particular, it is not possible to attract experienced filmmakers and those professionals who are really developing the film industry, because the salary is too low, only equivalent to cleaning and housekeeping staff.

Those are the specific reasons. And another important reason that education has not attracted good lecturers is because society as a whole has not seen a great opportunity in cinema, but only a small aura of glamour. It has not been recognized that this is an industry that can create commercial and economic value with attractive incomes. As a result, talented people choose the financial and economic sectors, but not the film industry. That's the reality. The filmmaking workforce lacks a wave. The current system is a mess, and that makes it difficult for industry personnel to come together to make big strides like other countries.

A glimmer of hope is now being placed on the few private universities that have recently opened. Filmmakers have the freedom to choose their educational programs, and they also have an up-to-date approach to training because the people in charge are mostly young people who have studied abroad. This may be the start of providing a significant amount of qualified personnel to domestic film production facilities, but it is also not an easy thing. In the end, there is still a need for the synchronization of film education. Higher levels of government must be involved in order to have stronger investments in all parts of the film industry, not just focusing on directors and actors. And there needs to be a more long-term vision in encouraging filmmakers to access closed valves on governance, censorship policies, and access to capital. Gradually, the conditions for the film industry to develop more easily will emerge.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*The future of the film industry depends on the young generation. Do you think this word "young" is sometimes a barrier for filmmakers holding key positions such as director, editor, screenwriter or even production designer?*

**Phan Dang Di**

I don't see the word "young" as a barrier or a weakness. Young people are naturally inexperienced. As a film lecturer at many universities in Vietnam and also the founder of the Autumn Meeting program, which is focused on short courses of film, I see clearly that if we want to change, we must start with young people.

The advantage of young people is that they have escaped from the past, they have confidence and are fluent in foreign languages. The doors of the previous era are closed, and the current generation has already opened new doors. So the younger generation can now connect with the outside, or connect with each other and work together.

Youth is a necessity, but most importantly, the older generation has to create policies and an environment that is beneficial to young people. Young people cannot do this on their own because they lack the authority, and are not in the right positions to do so. This responsibility belongs to their forerunners who have been in the system and this environment for many years, both in the private sector and in the government. But unfortunately, the responsible figures in the government are not supporters of young people. The policies made by them are not to promote the development of cinema so that young people can grow up and compete with foreign countries. Mainly, governors are falling into a state of keeping guard with many fears, lacking the will to open the road, open up new space, open the environment to empower young people to take off. The barriers and weaknesses do not lie within the young generation, but in their forerunners who hold responsibility, but are not wholeheartedly for young people or the development of cinema.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Autumn Meeting is an annual filmmaker training program that to many young Vietnamese filmmakers feels like a home. And you are one of the founders of this household. What plan do you have for upcoming editions of Autumn Meeting so that the young generation can "keep going home"?*

**Phan Dang Di**

The year 2022 marks the 10th anniversary of Autumn Meeting. We can see from those who have been in the film industry for a long time and have been able to go abroad to connect with foreign systems, the organization of the Autumn Meeting is really necessary to bring opportunities and a ray of hope to the young generation. Although the program only lasts for 10 days with short courses, here we not only help young Vietnamese filmmakers meet each other, but also to meet colleagues from around the world, in the Asian region, or to meet curators from major film festivals and international film funds.

Up to now, the Autumn Meeting has become an international event that has brought about clear results. We have helped Vietnamese filmmakers connect to the international system more easily, no more confusion as before. Second, projects from Autumn Meeting have been made into feature-length films that were shown at major international film festivals, some of which have been commercially successful. Among them are *Rom* (2019) which won the top prize at the Busan International Film Festival, or *The Third Wife* (2018) which has sold in many countries and also won prizes at major international film

**Phan Dang Di**

festivals. Most recently, the film *Taste* (2021) by Le Bao also won the special jury prize at the Berlin International Film Festival, and Yeo Siew Hua from Singapore also won the Golden Leopard award at the Locarno International Film Festival for *A Land Imagined* (2018). Not to mention that there are still many students of Autumn Meeting whose short films have been selected to top film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Locarno. It is the result of Autumn Meeting that gives us confidence that if we go the right way, if we know how to organize it properly, it will open up a lot of opportunities for young people, and the results will be immediate. Young Vietnamese filmmakers are not incapable, the question is whether their forerunners can create a good environment for them, help them access effective resources, teach them it is possible to get the right path, and help them to connect with each other at home and abroad.

When we created Autumn Meeting, we have done just that, proving that the talents from Vietnam can bring products to the world. It is a pity that although we have made great strides in the Autumn Meeting sessions, it is still only a personal effort. Without support from the government, we have to find small sources of finance, contact the guests, organize the events, and every year it takes at least half a year to prepare. In the end we have been satisfied with the results, but at the same time we are tired because we didn't have time to spend on my personal film projects with film producer Tran Thi Bich Ngoc, the co-founder of Autumn Meeting. After 10 years, we are very proud of the achievements of Autumn Meeting because this annual program is known not only in Vietnam, but has spread to Southeast Asia and Asia. But Autumn Meeting's path forward is quite obscure because the support that we receive is not regular or strong enough.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Based on your experience with Autumn Meeting, do you intend to develop an international film festival within the same ecosystem as Autumn Meeting?*

**Phan Dang Di**

Actually, when I founded Autumn Meeting, I was inspired by the model of Busan International Film Festival (BIFF). This was also the place where I introduced my feature debut *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* to the world in 2007. That was also the first time I came to an international film festival and interacted with international colleagues. When I came to Busan, I found this to be a very useful and practical model for Asian filmmakers to learn from. So I thought, why not try to establish a similar model in Vietnam, with training courses, or a small-scale project market.

After that, we referred more to the models of Western countries such as Locarno or Rotterdam, then Berlin and Cannes. Those are all very old film festivals, with huge scale and major sources of support. From them we learned some good points to apply to the Autumn Meeting. In 2012, the first Autumn Meeting was full of Vietnamese students and there was only one directing course with director Tran Anh Hung as the lecturer. But by the second year, we had expanded with international lecturers. Besides director Tran Anh Hung, we had instructors who taught cinematography and film production. And the third year, there were international students. The goal of Autumn Meeting from the beginning was to support young filmmakers, independent filmmakers.

A few years ago, I went to lunch with Mr. Kim Dong Ho, former chairman of BIFF, and had a long conversation with him. He said that BIFF started from a few individuals, and he was one of them. But in order for this film festival to develop, it had to rely on the policies of

**Phan Dang Di**

the government, and also the support of major film companies. With the right strategy, BIFF has become a top film festival in Asia. After talking with Mr. Kim Dong Ho, I understood that Autumn Meeting had the necessary conditions to be able to develop into a film festival. But in order to become a real film festival with theaters where the audience can come and watch films together, it's a huge deal, involving the policy of an entire city.

From the beginning we chose Da Nang as the location, because we could clearly see that Da Nang has many features that are even better than Busan. Da Nang has the sea and is close to many cultural heritage sites such as Hue, Ninh Son, Hoi An and Quang Binh. We really hope that the Da Nang government can cooperate with us to make a model of a film festival with large cinema theaters, and then the squares can hold big events which could turn into a familiar activity for audiences in this locality. We had a specific plan, but we didn't have much experience working with the government, so in the end, we couldn't implement it. If we can soon share this point of view with the government, there can be no better place than Da Nang to organize a major film festival, an international film activity.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*There are some veteran Vietnamese filmmakers who stuck with the 35mm film era, but lately they gave up filmmaking in the digital era and returned to teaching, or switched to another profession. Why such a paradox?*

**Phan Dang Di**

Actually, when analog film converted to digital film, it's just a change in technique, the mindset of filmmaking is still the same. Of course, we also need to understand that in Vietnam it's not just a matter of changing the method or technique of filmmaking, but a change of system. The film era was associated with a model where all studios belonged to the government, and the government film studios' operations were very different from private studios. And how interesting it is that there were no Vietnamese private film studios before 2002.

In 2002 when the government allowed private film studios to be established, that was also the beginning of the digital era. And from that time on, the government's studios no longer received much support from the government, so those studios gradually died because the model was out of phase with the times. And there are some directors who make us think that they didn't make movies anymore because of technical changes, but that was not the case. In fact, it was because all their lives they had been used to the production methods of the subsidized model. When it was necessary to participate in the new model with private studios, that put commercial factors as the first priority.

Those who worked in the government system didn't need to care about revenue and profit, they just kept doing their assigned tasks. Of course, it would be difficult for them to adjust to the new situation. Coincidentally, the film cameras too gradually disappeared, at the same time that government-owned film studios were on the decline. The cinema subsidy model with the support from the government ended there.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Finally, what is your biggest fear?*

**Phan Dang Di**

My biggest fear is being lazy. The older you get, the more lazy you feel. And actually my fear is also related to Vietnamese cinema. After a long time working in filmmaking, I feel that the crucial conditions for the development of Vietnamese cinema have not been met

**Phan Dang Di**

and are still uncertain. In such a situation, such slow improvement, lack of smart policies and lack of good direction from the leaders, I wonder when the country's cinema will be competitive? It is a very big fear of mine.

- April 16, 2022

by

**Tan Hoang Thong (hoangthong.nguyentan@gmail.com)** is a young film producer and director residing in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He worked as an assistant director on *Rom* (2020), and was trained in screenwriting by a Senior Story Analyst of DreamWorks SKG. He formerly worked as a production assistant in a project by CJ Foundation, and also had a great opportunity to study abroad in Korea. Other positions he has held include Assistant Director on *Like an Old House* (2017) and DIT for *KFC* (2017).

Hoang Thong was producer/writer/director of a short film *Melancholy* which was selected as the opening screening of the short film program at Autumn Meeting 2018, receiving many positive reviews. It later screened at the Busan International Short Film Festival 2022. At Autumn Meeting 2019, Hoang Thong won a slot in the Top 5 Entertainment Film World with a crime genre feature film project named *A Good Bad Luck*. Currently in the works is his directorial feature debut, a horror film named *Tron Tim*, which is similar to hide-n-seek - the oldest, most popular and creepiest traditional game in Vietnam.

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# DO QUANG MINH

Producer

Vietnam

Interview by Tan Hoang Thong

Do Quang Minh is a film producer with 30 years of experience in the industry, known for the outstanding box office success of his feature films, high rated TV shows and award-winning TV series in Vietnam.

Minh graduated from the Faculty of Film Directing at Ho Chi Minh City University of Performing Arts and Cinema. He started his producing career with the TV series *Doctors* (2008) which won a Golden Award for Favorite TV series at Vietnam's largest TV Series Film Festival. In 2009, he produced his first feature film *Burning Kisses*, which was a big success at Vietnamese box-office. Building off of that, Minh continued to produce many successful Vietnamese feature films such as *Once Upon A Time In Vietnam* (2013), *The Lady Assassin* (2013) and most recently, *Lucky Key* (2021) and *Extremely Easy Job* (2022). He is now works as an executive producer/producer and a guest teacher at the Film Training Course - Hoa Sen University.

Do Quang Minh is the founder of MinhDoFilm, one of the most famous production houses in Vietnam. His production house has a bonding relationship with Vietnamese-American actor and filmmaker Dustin Nguyen and has produced several of Dustin's films.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*How can we measure the importance of a producer?*

**Do Quang Minh**

I started in 1992 as a production assistant, so I've already been 30 years in the film production industry. Dino De Laurentiis, an Italian producer who has produced and co-produced more than 500 films around the world in his 70 years of work, once said: "If no producer, no movie". Usually when looking at a movie, people first look at the actor, then the director, then the quality of the film, but very few audiences care about the production. I often liken the production position to the foundation of a house. The foundation must be solid before I can start building a beautiful and sustainable house. Having a good producer and good film crew is to fulfill the ambitions of the director and screenwriter. The foundation of the house is covered in the ground by the splendid auras above, so few could see it. That is the specificity of the producer, and it is also something that the producer is always proud of because without a solid foundation, the house will not be sustainable.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*What qualities does the producer need to become a solid foundation?*

**Do Quang Minh**

In Vietnam, the salary of actors and directors will always increase according to the success of each film they participate in, and there are films that are so successful that it helps actors and directors raise their salaries ten times. But the salaries for producers do not increase with the success of the film. This is probably typical in this market, the producers are passionate about their profession and are enthusiastic about creating a product. In addition, producers must have their own strategic vision, measure potential risks and have enough experience to deal with them. The balance between pursuing artistic aspirations and ensuring production efficiency for investors has never been easy.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Won't the young generation of film producers in Vietnam easily falter if the position of producer is difficult to develop, compared to other positions in the same industry?*

**Do Quang Minh**

The lack of balance in the career path of a producer compared to other positions leads to a shortage in the supply of personnel, that can affect the development of the film industry. In particular, Vietnamese film production is now gradually becoming an industry. To be a producer, it is really necessary to have a lot of skills, but if you don't have a sustainable development, that's a concern. That's not to say that young film producers in Vietnam will falter. They need a well-trained environment and support so that they can develop right from the moment they start rekindling their passion for the profession. What is not available in Vietnam is formal training, to help them find development opportunities in the industry.

**Tan Hoang Thong**

*Have you thought about taking part in training film producers at Vietnamese universities?*

**Do Quang Minh**

I took part in a teaching program on filmmaking at a fairly large private university in Vietnam. What I brought to the program was mainly seminars and workshops to share my experiences. Usually I will talk about the difficulties that a producer has to face. Sharing difficulties here is not to make the students give up, but when sharing my profession's difficulties to the students, I want to see them commit and work together to find more effective solutions to address the needs of the market.

**Do Quang Minh** I think universities have become very outdated lately in their training courses on film production, but what I always share with students is that in addition to studying at school, you should boldly apply for the producer position of a film production, from the lowest positions (maybe a runner, can also be a production assistant...) to experience it realistically. When the students go to the film set, they can observe and learn from expert filmmakers. "Fire proves gold, adversity proves men" - and if you can't overcome the pressure and hardship, this film producing profession is really not for you!

**Tan Hoang Thong** *From your perspective, in the Vietnamese film market, do producers compete with each other for the right to produce projects?*

**Do Quang Minh** In Vietnam, for someone with a production mindset like mine, receiving a project depends on two factors: first, the relationship, with the director or investor; and second, the ability to produce and manage costs. I'm lucky because I have comrades who are directors and like my production style, so almost every movie they make they will directly recommend me to investors.

Competitiveness in film producing in Vietnam depends on relationships. Often relationships will lead to projects. Instead of competing by the capacity to pitch large projects, producers will use personal relationships to approach the project. I think the pitching sessions will be very useful to all parties involved because through those sessions, me and other colleagues will be able to look back on our own strengths and weaknesses so that we can keep improving ourselves. At the same time, the projects will also have access to producers with suitable capacity, ensuring the output quality of the project.

In addition, the production cost factor is also very important in a new film market like Vietnam. There are big production houses that also accept the director's recommendations about booking which producer, but they will consider using in-house production executives because they can capture production capacity, easily manage costs and coordinate whenever they need.

**Tan Hoang Thong** *The future of the film industry depends on the young generation. Do you think this word "young" is sometimes a barrier for filmmakers holding key positions such as director, editor, screenwriter or even production designer?*

**Do Quang Minh** In this regard, I have to look at the specific qualities of the seventh art. If you are a writer, musician, or painter, to complete a work you only need to spend time, effort, and a reasonable amount of money, it doesn't cost too much. But to make a movie, no matter what position you work in, you need to use a lot of money to get the job done in your own department, not to mention the other departments. And this money often comes from one or many different investors. A film is judged or valued as a success or failure only after it has been completed and released to the public. So, carefully considering when choosing personnel to join the crew is the right thing to do. So the "young" people only have one way to prove themselves through each project. There's no way if you're new to the profession that you should already want to be a director, screenwriter, or producer. You have to build your career from the smallest positions in the team so that those who come before you can evaluate your ability. Unless you have a large enough financial

**Do Quang Minh** backing from your family, in that case you can jump right into the core positions of a film crew and do whatever you want. And if you want to become a professional filmmaker, when you enter this industry, you must be tested by a fierce examination. That's what you need to deal with when you're still a "young" person.

**Tan Hoang Thong** *In terms of producer training for the film industry in Vietnam, what makes you anxious?*

**Do Quang Minh** In Vietnam, many filmmaker training organizations are more focused on writers, directors, and actors rather than on producers. Up to now, I have not seen an educational institution in Vietnam that is purely oriented towards producer training. This belongs to the plans, visions and strategies of the top government leaders. It can be said that this is the responsibility of the Cinema Department at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Vietnam Cinema Association, and I am just struggling as an individual about the training of young producers. At present, efforts to strengthen and develop the Vietnamese cinema industry are still maintained at an individual level.

I hope that the University of Theater and Cinema of Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi will open all faculties. Currently, there are only departments that train directors, actors, and cinematographers, but there is no film producer training department. The two major government-owned universities have not yet appreciated the importance of the producer role in training. So now, young people who want to learn about production have to go to Western countries such as the US, Australia, UK, and France. It is an encouraging effort on their parts. However, when they return to Vietnam to start making films, they will face practical difficulties because they are taught according to the standards of a developed cinema industry, and Vietnamese standards are not the same as what they have been taught. Theory and practice are completely different stories. There are stages that are completely removed in the workflow of a Vietnamese film crew when compared with foreign standards because the Vietnamese market is still quite small, so investors cannot spend a large amount of money on those removed stages like developed markets can.

In short, the Vietnamese market is facing barriers for the film production industry. The first is the budget limitation. The second is that the Vietnamese market is not grown enough to be able to produce movies with a large budget. Next, there is no formal training for film producers in the Vietnamese film industry, so young people have to seek formal education in foreign markets.

**Tan Hoang Thong** *If you were 15 years younger, what dreams would you want to fulfill?*

**Do Quang Minh** The first thing that I want to try is to direct an animated film project. Because when I first started to participate in this industry, I studied in the department of directing. With the producing experience that I have accumulated for a long time, I think I understand what the producer needs and what the director needs to be able to work together to make a quality animated film.

And the second thing I want to do is to build a film studio, because currently in Vietnam there is no professional studio for filmmakers. Currently, I have a studio with a scale that is not large enough to be used by many film crews at the same time. But with that small studio, I have gained practical experience, so that I can think and plan more clearly about

**Do Quang Minh**

a large and professional studio. Currently, I have also started to take the first steps. I hope that in the future, when someone sees this set, they will remember that I was the first to initiate it.

- May 4, 2022

by

**Tan Hoang Thong (hoangthong.nguyentan@gmail.com)** is a young film producer and director residing in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He worked as an assistant director on *Rom* (2020), and was trained in screenwriting by a Senior Story Analyst of DreamWorks SKG. He formerly worked as a production assistant in a project by CJ Foundation, and also had a great opportunity to study abroad in Korea. Other positions he has held include Assistant Director on *Like an Old House* (2017) and *DIT for KFC* (2017).

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## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# HUU TUAN NGUYEN

Film Director  
Vietnam

Interview by Jelly Trang Nguyen

Born in 1984, film director Huu-Tuan Nguyen is a member of the Vietnam Cinema Association. Though he entered the Vietnamese film industry late, Nguyen is the first filmmaker of his 1980s generation to release a feature film: *Of Us and June* ('Dành Cho Tháng Sáu', 2012). This high school basketball movie was a rare Vietnamese indie film at that time. It was praised by critics and awarded the Jury Prize at the 18th Viet Nam Film Festival in 2013. His second film *My Son, Where are You?* ('Mặt Trời Con Ở Đâu') is a family movie that was released in December 2018.

In 2019, he received funding from the Busan Film Commission to participate in the residency programme at Busan Asian Film School. Within the framework of the event, he developed a psychological thriller entitled *The Cruel Hunt* ('Cuộc San Tan Nhan'). The film's script then reached the quarterfinal round in the BlueCat Screenplay Competition.

Jelly Trang  
Nguyen

*First of all, thank you for accepting an interview from me, a fellow of the AFIS program.*

Huu-Tuan Nguyen

Yes, I am always willing to share my experience as an alumnus and also a professional storyteller.

Jelly Trang  
Nguyen

*What are the most useful things you learned from the AFIS program that could be applied to filmmaking in Vietnam in recent years?*

Huu-Tuan Nguyen

Of course, there was a lot of valuable knowledge, especially to someone like me who had previously been exclusively concerned with the domestic film business. Furthermore, the opportunities to network with top Asian filmmakers and acquire insights into how the international filmmaking industry operates have proven to be extremely helpful.

However, to be honest, I have not had the opportunity to apply it to filmmaking practice in Vietnam yet. The knowledge that I learned at school is mainly focused on serving arthouse and independent film projects, while I mainly focus on producing more commercial films. I received the support of two partners from Singapore (mm2) and Malaysia (ByLeft) to submit my project for the IMDA Grant 2020. However, perhaps the genre of the movie is not the type of film that the international funds are interested in, so I have not submitted more.

And with the recent pandemic situation, I have mainly been working on scripts, investing in some projects, and supporting the publication of comics, but I have not been directly involved in any more film production projects. But for sure, even though I have not applied it yet, it will be possible in the near future. For example, I am willing to support young filmmakers.

What I worry about now is the slow recovery of the Vietnamese theatrical market. In the past, a commercial film of good quality could collect 10 billion Vietnam dollars (VND) (US\$430,000) worth of tickets per day. Or even without much promotion, the weekend revenue of a movie in theaters was also several billion VND. Now there are some movies, not mentioning their quality, that are about to come out of theaters with revenue reaching only a few hundred million VND. It is an alarming fact for all professionals in filmmaking and distribution.

Jelly Trang  
Nguyen

*But the pandemic was also a time for the explosion of various streaming services. Do you see the prospect of the encroachment of OTT content replacing movies?*

Huu-Tuan Nguyen

I don't think so. In both the present and the future, streaming is irreplaceable, and it should not completely replace the theater. Audiences subscribed to OTT services a lot in the pandemic, because for a while they did not have many other options, all the cinemas were closed, they could not even go out. However, enjoying a movie at a big screen theater, with good sound, sharing emotions with other viewers or meeting people in the theatre... is the real great experience of cinema. If one day theaters disappear, I am afraid there will be no reason for the feature film format to exist anymore, especially blockbusters that invest greatly in production quality. If OTT was left as the only channel for audience viewing, then only series and miniseries would exist. I do not want to see that happen.

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen** However, the question of how to make audiences come back to the theater after a long time spent hiding in their homes is an extremely difficult problem. The theatrical market and feature film industry in Vietnam is falling into a deadly loop. There are too few movies in theaters, especially blockbusters. Only blockbusters can give audiences a worthy motivation to go to the theaters again. So we have to make more high quality movies, right? But right now, when the market is so risky, not many investors are interested in investing in movies. Financing is cut off, many projects stop production, and film shortages will continue in the near future. I have never wished for Hollywood to be “great again” as much as now, because the internal strength of the Vietnamese film industry today is not enough to save itself.

**Jelly Trang Nguyen** *But according to my observations, many Vietnamese independent films follow their own path and produce positive results, right?*

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen** It’s true that there was just an independent film *Đêm tối rực rỡ* (‘The Brilliant Darkness’) that earned more than 20 billion VND (US\$950,000) and got the audience’s and the critics’ attention. However, that only helps investors from going bankrupt, it has no significant impact on a market that is shrinking too much. There’s still a trillion VND short to revive such an expensive film industry.

Since cinemas were reopened in November 2021, no Vietnamese film has exceeded the hundred billion VND mark, showing that the market capacity is less than half of the time before the pandemic. Some slightly better films such as *Bầy Ngọt Ngào* (‘Naked Truth’) or *Chuyện Ma Gần Nhà* (‘Vietnamese Horror Story’) have had a long theatrical run that can be considered ineffective compared to the showing time. The most recent example is the movie *Nghề Siêu Dễ* (‘Extremely Easy Job’, a remake of the Korean film *Extreme Job*) only earning about 70 billion VND (US\$3,000,000) after 4 weeks. Fortunately, *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* has partly raised hopes for theater chains when it earned about 170 billion VND (US\$8,000,000) after 2 weeks. But this year, how many movies do we still have like *Dr. Strange*?

The pressure to survive for today’s theater chains is really terrible. A pandemic may not be too stressful for a particular film producer or production house, as they may be taking a break from making movies or shifting business directions. But it damages the whole exhibition industry. Many multiplexes, many single theaters had to close because they could not make up their losses. Fixed costs to maintain theaters are very large, in locations where there are no visitors, the revenue will not be able to cover expenses. The future will remain relatively pessimistic, at least until the end of the year.

Also, I still think our country’s film industry has never and never will be based on independent films, or the fact that many filmmakers bring their arthouse projects to international events. This labor-intensive industry has always been fed by quality commercial films that have great reach, satisfying the entertainment needs of viewers and profits for producers.

**Jelly Trang Nguyen** *You became a last-minute director for My Son, Where are You? (‘Mặt trời con ở đâu’), a children’s feature film. What experience did you gain in the process of making this film?*

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen** I entered late, only a month before filming, so I did not have time to edit the script. The biggest issue of *My Son, Where are You?* is a script that is not good, lacking many successful factors. Most viewers go to theaters to see big stars, not to see children act. If the movie’s content is interesting, there is still hope to save it, but if not, then where to cling? The failure is predictable, despite censorship issues. Even if the movie were rated P (popular for every audience), the business situation would not be any better. As a hired director, coming in late, I could only do my best to improve the project’s quality.

Look at it another way, maybe I came to this film to challenge myself, to see if I could work with child actors. There are 11 kids in the movie, a pretty intimidating number. After reviewing their audition tapes, I could see that they are all very talented. But on my side I also have to prepare methodologically. For children, it takes a good warm-up in terms of daily acting, and the director has a lot of other things to do on the set. So I had to add one more person to the director team. This friend is a director, and was also a child actor. Every day, he will be responsible for preparing the foundation for the children, because many times the children read the script and do not understand the words, let alone the psychology. Then when I get to the scene I’ll be the last to tweak it. Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done by then, but 70% of the burden will be relieved. Luckily for us, the young cast were really natural born actors. Otherwise, no matter how hard we tried, the results wouldn’t be as good. I am very proud of my child actors.

**Jelly Trang Nguyen** *What do you think about the output of children’s films in the current and near-future Vietnamese film market?*

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen** In general, film production is very risky at this time. Theatrical films aimed at children have not been successfully produced in Vietnam for 15 years, which makes it even more risky. Very difficult.

**Jelly Trang Nguyen** *Is the objective situation of the film industry the reason for you to switch to doing more comic projects, and to find other outlets for the script you currently have?*

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen** Yes, that’s exactly how I’ve adapted to the tragic situation of cinema. My script *The Cruel Hunt* is originally a movie with a production budget of about 12-14 billion VND (US\$500,000-\$630,000), plus marketing and distribution costs, but at this time no one dares to invest in production, even myself.

Therefore, if I invest 2 or 3 billion VND (US\$90,000-\$140,000) in producing comics now, I have the advantage of being able to distribute to many markets and digital distribution platforms as well. The market is much wider and there are almost no barriers. Sure, it is going to be a lot less profitable than making a movie in the short term, but it is also a smart way forward. My IP has also grown, so I try to exploit it from other angles, so as not to be wasted.

After finishing the AFIS program, I also have a new feeling about the IP market and believe that I can exploit it more. The school does not teach specifically about that problem, but it gave me the opportunity to see and approach things internationally, so that I can think and find suitable solutions. I remember in Busan there was also an IP convention, held around August-September. The Busan Film Festival itself also had activities to introduce

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen**

different ways of exploiting content. Before the epidemic, there were many profitable investment opportunities in the Vietnamese film market, so people had not thought about exploiting IP in many other ways like this. When my movie can triple the profit, I do not need to consider other ways. However, the situation has changed. My scripts are all movie scripts, I am a movie director, too, what I aspire to the most is to tell stories in the language of cinema, not any other form. But if you consider yourself a visual storyteller, comics are also a close related field. After some talks with a few cartoonists and comic artists, I have found that I have a lot of experience and knowledge that I can put in to enhance their expertise. So my comic work in some ways has an educational value as a new career prospect, using visual language to tell a story.

**Jelly Trang**

**Nguyen**

**Huu-Tuan Nguyen**

*Can you tell us more about your most recent work?*

I continue to look for opportunities to exploit the IP of *The Cruel Hunt* script, develop new scripts, guide young people, and consider offers to co-produce with OTT channels or content partners, who are seeking scripts to produce.

Among them, I also have an interesting project. It is a screenplay about a young director on his special spiritual journey to find answers to life in Busan itself. During my time at AFiS, I try to wander around a lot and it's hard not to fall in love with a lovely place like Busan. Enjoy the time when you go there in autumn, go to the beach, go hiking, go to the seafood market, visit the temples... I finally got the inspiration for a story to pay tribute to Busan, I hope you guys also find something like me.

**Jelly Trang**

**Nguyen**

*Thank you again for your sharing.*

*- April 19, 2022*

by

**Jelly Nguyen Thi My Trang** is a scriptwriter, movie journalist and novelist living in Vietnam. She graduated from the Ford Foundation Film Writing Programming Class in Hanoi National University in 2007, then became Galaxy TV studio content manager, specializing in producing TV series for VTV3, a Vietnamese television station operated and owned by government-owned Vietnam Television. In 2008 she worked for TPD (Centre for Assistance and Development of Movie Talents – Vietnam) as a project manager, and was a columnist for Vietnam World Magazine – the voice of Vietnam Cinema Association. In 2015, she was selected as the Best Talent in the Talent Campus of Hanoi International Film Festival and received a 65th Berlin Film study tour award in 2016. She is writer, co-writer and script doctor of around 600 episodes of TV drama, web drama, 5 feature films, 2 novels, a short story collection and many commercial videos. From 2016-2019 she was Content Strategist at FPTPlay, the most popular Vietnamese OTT app. Since 2017 she has also been an invited lecturer in Hoa Sen University, HCMC, Vietnam in Media Programming and Narrative Strategy classes from 2017. She attended the International Film Business Academy course at Busan Asian Film School to study film producing.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals



# AMR GAMAL

Film / Theater Director

Yemen

Interview by Fatima Al-Absi

Translated by Ahmed Mounneef Motahar and Hussein Khaled Al-Yareemi

Amr Gamal (b.1983, Poland) is an independent Yemeni film and theater director. In 2003, he received the President's Award in playwriting. In 2005, Gamal established Khaleej Aden Theatre Troupe; he has written and directed all the theater productions by the troupe since 2005. His play 'Ma'k Nazel' became the first Yemeni play to be performed in Europe (Berlin) after its big success in Yemen. In spring 2018, production began for his first feature film *10 Days Before the Wedding*. The film premiered in Aden during the summer, becoming the first film to open commercially in Yemen in the last three decades. The film continued to be screened for over 8 months and became Yemen's official submission to the Oscars Best Foreign Language Film category in 2018. Amr Gamal lives and works in Aden, Yemen.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Who is Amr Gamal?*

**Amr Gamal**

A young man from Yemen, specifically Aden. An art lover and believer. Since I was a child, I have been very fond of art, theater and cinema. My eyes would sparkle when I saw any performance, whether it was on stage or in a film. Since my childhood, I have been writing short stories, being active in school theater, and in all school activities and competitions. Therefore, my personality began to form, and those around me felt that one day I would be a writer and a director. Indeed, I gradually developed afterward, I was doing plays in school and participating in writing competitions. Step by step, things proceeded into the establishment of a theater group in Aden, the production of a television series, and recently the film.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*If there was a time machine that could take us back into the past, specifically to one of the films that you have made, which film would you choose to edit to make it look better?*

**Amr Gamal**

I have directed only two films, which are *10 Days Before the Wedding*, and recently *The Burdened*. Yet I've produced 8-9 long plays, and more than 120 TV episodes. I can say that if I could go back in time, I would always amend all the works I've done to make them better, because I believe that in every finished job, you discover later on that you could have done better. There is no person who is honest with themselves and see their work that they have completed after a while, until they observe that there are flaws, they could do better to fix them. So, if I could go back in time, I would actually do all the works that I have done in a better way.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*10 Days Before the Wedding is your first feature film. Tell us about its journey from an idea to the screening either internationally or locally, and the awards it won?*

**Amr Gamal**

At first it was a crazy attempt, especially in the current situation, and I mean the complicated political situation. It is very difficult for a person to think about making a cinema in Yemen, if primarily there was no cinema in the normal and peaceful situation before 2011, and especially before 2015. But it was a crazy idea that popped into our heads as a group of young people in Aden. We asked ourselves why don't we make a film, and achieve a great ambition that we've dreamed of for a long time, but always postponed it. It could also be due to the lack of cinematic productions in the first three years after war began (2016-2017-2018). There was shallowness in TV production, and the channels were reluctant to produce enough TV work, and there was a fear of bringing people back to the stage. This emptiness made us think and ask ourselves, why aren't we working on a film? That is, the feeling of powerlessness in relation to television and theater, made the old dream come back to the fore.

Indeed, we began to write and prepare the scripts, the difficulties started to be overcome, and we filmed *10 Days Before the Wedding* with our experience of working in television. We arranged the screening of the film, but unfortunately, all the cinemas and theaters in Aden were completely destroyed after the 1994 summer war. We had to look for a screening room, then we could only find two amphitheatric halls that were left in Aden, which were by chance two wedding halls. So, we rented both of them and built a display out of large timber (6 \* 4 m), and we bought an HD projector for a reasonable amount. We arranged things and organized the audience's attendance with our previous experience in

## **Amr Gamal**

the theater. We screened the film and our expectations for it were at a minimum. And then, we saw that day after day its success in Aden exceeded expectations. So, we added another screening, until we reached five screenings per day in two halls (that is, ten screenings per day). The demand among audiences was unbelievable. That film became not only the focus of attention for the people of Aden, but also people coming from other provinces in order to travel to other countries, because Aden was a stopover due to the presence of the airport, and they arranged to be in Aden a day or two before their travel date in order to watch the film.

This great success motivated us to present the film to festivals. We started messaging festivals, pushing our luck, and we found some kind of acceptance. After that, festivals began accepting the film, and we saw that the matter became more than just a film for entertainment that we screened to the people and the audience in Yemen, rather, the matter exceeded that, and festivals began to accept it. We started corresponding with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which is the Oscars in America, and we were able to present the film and be accepted as Yemen's candidate for the Oscars in 2018. The film was also accepted into the Golden Globe Awards in America. Following this, the film began to participate in Arab festivals, and we won the Jury Prize at Aswan International Women's Film Festival in Egypt, and the Best Screenplay Award at Casablanca Arab Film Festival in Morocco. Then we were able to get the Audience Choice Award at the San Diego Film Festival in the U.S., the Audience Choice Award at Amman Arab Film Festival, the Best Makeup and Hairstyle Award, and the Best Costume Design Award at the Jaipur International Film Festival in India. Thereafter, many festivals began to request the film, such as the Kazan International Festival of Muslim Cinema in Russia, festivals in America, festivals in South Korea, and in Tanzania as well. Suddenly, we found ourselves traveling and the film is screening everywhere. In addition, a wide range of prestigious universities in America screened the film such as Harvard, Yale, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania. The film was also screened at the United Nations building in New York, the US State Department in Washington, the headquarters of the United Nations, the UNDP in Brussels, in addition to a large number of forums that I cannot count now.

## **Fatima Al-Absi**

*How did this film change the world's view of Yemen?*

## **Amr Gamal**

This film highlighted the suffering of young people in Yemen, and the daily lives of ordinary people who are economically affected by the war. It also focused on positive matters, namely that the Yemeni youth are still enduring and struggling despite all the pain, and that women in Yemen are energetic and strong. We also got some kind of praise for the portrayal of Yemeni women in our film. Strong, energetic, and independent, they were not broken and weak characters, but on the contrary, the woman in the film represented the main motive for overcoming adversity. This was by representing mothers in their homes while they helped their husbands financially, and working on small projects in order to improve the family's income in these difficult circumstances. As for the heroine, she worked hard in the film to help the hero and raise his spirits so that the marriage would be successful. All these positive things made me feel proud when I heard that people were happy to see the Yemeni people as resistant and struggling, and about the film highlighting the difficult economic conditions that our people lived through at that time and still are.

## **Fatima Al-Absi**

*What is your strategy as Yemeni filmmaker in financing and distributing your films? Let us take 10 Days Before the Wedding as an example, from a domestic and international point of view.*

## **Amr Gamal**

Our planning for the film was spontaneous, but the film's path started through the theater. Our way of starting a work is by initially preparing a well-designed file, containing all the sufficient information about the project we are about to present. Let's talk about the film *10 Days Before the Wedding*, we wrote in this file the benefits of the sponsors, and how much each sponsor offered according to his classification. For example, the Diamond sponsor offered thirty thousand dollars, the Gold sponsor offered twenty thousand dollars, and the Silver sponsor offered ten thousand dollars. Each of these sponsors has certain advantages in regard to advertising, such as printing their logo on billboards, or showing a short trailer for the sponsor on the screen before the film is screened, or putting advertisements in publications. Or it is also possible to distribute some of the sponsor's products to the audience at the gate of the film's screening room before its screening. We offer to each sponsor these features as options for him to choose what he likes, and through persuasion and the positive relationships we have built with the sponsors over the past years through our success in the theater, we were initially able to get funding in this way to work on our film *10 Days Before the Wedding*.

After that, the success of the film's screenings in the showrooms is what motivated other matters to appear, such as the Arab distributor. An Emirati film distribution company also contacted us and screened the film in the Gulf countries, then they also introduced us to one of the Egyptian companies – it is the same company that contacted us for distribution in Egypt after our success at the Aswan International Women's Film Festival in Egypt. Thus, other achievements followed, and the film was the reason for those successive successes. This also motivated us to have higher ambitions for the next film, for which we are currently in post-production. The budget for this film has risen dramatically after the excellent success of *10 Days Before the Wedding*.

Through this, we were able to bring foreign experts to Yemen, like an Indian director of photography, a film editor from Egypt, and sound engineers from Lebanon. This enables young Yemeni trainees to work under their supervision and learn from their experiences, each in their respective field. In this way we can have benefits in the future from the Yemeni youth who gained experience from foreigners. This wasn't possible the first time, but the second time it was, because we were able to find more funding. The Yemeni merchants and government were able to see the previous success of *10 Days Before the Wedding*, and they were excited to offer funding.

On the other hand, because of going abroad, and opening our minds to new ideas, we started to find out, for example, about things like funding and how to apply to support funds. There are many support funds you can apply to from the internet such as the Doha Film Institute, the Red Sea Film Festival, the World Cinema Fund, and there are many more on the sidelines of every festival. When you learn about support funds, your horizons can be expanded. Even when you start working on your project and go beyond production, many Arab and international entities come to know about what you are doing, and contact you to participate in your project. They see what you have and what you can do in order to carry the film to the next stage, and so matters continue. That's how we

**Amr Gamal**

work, and our chances with the new film are now greater than we had before. At the moment we are working in co-production with a Sudanese company, and an Egyptian distribution company has also signed with us. This is a good development for us, better than the first time, and the third time I hope it will be even greater.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Tell us more about your next film *The Burdened*.*

**Amr Gamal**

As for *The Burdened*, I can't currently offer much information about it, because the film is still in post-production, and hasn't been released yet. But what I can say is that it is a true painful story that took place in Aden in 2019. It talks about the difficult choices that complex circumstances, wars, and their effects impose on us: what would your choice be in the face of all these difficult choices, what are the consequences, and the results of this difficult choice? I can say that it's about how a Yemeni family, in these dire economic conditions, is sometimes faced with difficult and decisive choices, and who pays the price for these choices other than the modest citizen?

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*What is the importance of film festivals for you as a filmmaker?*

**Amr Gamal**

A film festival is a good way to be noticed by film producers from all over the world, or for your work to be seen by large distribution companies. If you can stand out at festivals, and draw attention through them, you will have an opportunity to facilitate the production process for any upcoming project. This point is the most important to me at festivals, more than awards, compliments, and so on. This festival is the means through which your uniqueness will facilitate the production of your next project, and there will be more people willing to support you. That's all that matters to me as a filmmaker, i.e., to continue producing, and that's the importance of festivals for me .

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*What criteria do you set for yourself in choosing the content of your films?*

**Amr Gamal**

There is always an idea, a topic, a story, or a side talk I hear, and that affects my soul and impacts me strongly. Sometimes it may be a simple conversation in a coffee shop. As soon as one of the points I have mentioned hits my heart hard, that feeling is what motivates me to choose that content. To give you a vivid example, all we will get to in the end of the film *The Burdened* is because of a WhatsApp message I received through a friend who complained about a problem he had fallen into. From the moment I heard the rattling of his voice, his expressions, and the pain that a minute and a half WhatsApp message caused me, I decided to make a film, as it truly touched my heart.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Unfortunately, there is no film industry in Yemen that can support filmmakers. As a filmmaker, how can you finance your film? What are the local, Arab, or even international organizations that can support your film to help it come out?*

**Amr Gamal**

Indeed, there is no film industry in Yemen. We started young. My first work ever was a play called "Aila.com". I produced that play with personal money and with the support of crew members. This experiment was in 2006, in which we performed theater sketches with the UN in remote areas to raise awareness regarding the election method. I was fully paid, and I also took some of the payments of my crew members colleagues who were ready to contribute. We took the payment and produced our first play, so that afterwards we

**Amr Gamal**

would have something we can go with to sponsors. We can not just go to sponsors and tell them that we are just a group of young people and we made a play. Who would care? We created success by our own production out of our personal income, as we traveled for performance to a number of remote districts and governorates in Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadhramaut. We took the payments for our works and produced a play, and that play succeeded, and when it did, we started to seek local sponsors for the second play. Day after day, a great trust began to arise between us, sponsors, and government authorities. In the beginning, the amount of money was small, but it started to grow gradually, and afterwards we could attract the attention of embassies.

For example, in 2010, Das Deutsche Haus Jemen-German House in Yemen produced a theater work of ours after we had produced five plays. What I want to say is that you should begin with your first step somehow and make your name known. After this first step you make with your own simple resources, you will then have a sponsor the next time, because they will see that you made something and you are not a crook. The bigger your work, the more sponsors you get, and so on. That is what has happened to us from 2006 all the way to 2022.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*What are some of the challenges and difficulties that the film industry faces in Yemen?*

**Amr Gamal**

Everything! You are talking about a situation where there is no infrastructure in Yemen, no infrastructure for cinemas, no theaters. In another words, they are all rotted and demolished, and their walls are dilapidated. If a screening location does not exist in the first place, and you do not have any lights, stage, backstage, or anything, then what will you do? All of these things are a misery.

Let's first say there is no infrastructure, and then we can touch on other issues, such as finance and how hard it is to get, the lack of actresses, and many other issues. You are talking about a country that has no infrastructure. How can you convince people to go out for filmmaking works? How can you convince women to act? How can you convince the sponsors to pay when you do not have a good stage? How can you convince young people to go and become screenwriters, cameramen, or editors? In Yemen, you can find only a few people who are well-known in editing, why? Because the field of editing is limited and narrow, and there is not much film production. Consequently, it would not encourage a lot of people to join the industry. I hope this gap with TV and the great number of productions there will give rise to a new creative generation to come out in light of the state's neglect of arts infrastructure.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Films are a language. Are there many people who understand this language in Yemen?*

**Amr Gamal**

For the cinematic language, let me say it is difficult. There might be a certain elite who can understand the concept of cinematic language. We carry on our shoulders a mountain of burdens as a result of 40 years of Yemeni TV, in which there were often meager scripts and the actors performed their roles with caricature and old melodrama methods that are no longer of any use nowadays. A Yemeni might see an intellectual work from abroad and they admire it, but when it comes to a Yemeni intellectual work, they ignore it, and that is because people eagerly wait for what they have become used to seeing over the past 40 years. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find many people who understand the

**Amr Gamal**

cinematic language. We have to try not to stay in the same place, to develop the language level, and to work and work more until we reach the point that people start to accept commercial works and works that have a language and a vision just like everywhere else in the world. I think we will go against expectations in the upcoming film that we are working on. Some may think that we are on a new commercial work, but the coming work has a special cinematic language and it may not present as much entertainment. After it is produced, only then can I measure whether or not I would be able to answer you more regarding this question, so that we can see if people will accept the cinematic language.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*It is said that, if you want to change people's minds, make the camera breathe. Is there really breathing for the camera in Yemen?*

**Amr Gamal**

The camera can and cannot breathe at the same time. It can breathe according to the political condition. To be clearer, the situation now in Sana'a causes the camera to suffocate. It can neither express nor explain anything. Even in the previous period before 2011, the period of the previous regime, the camera was breathing only under the allowance of the authorities. Meanwhile in Sana'a and the northern areas that are controlled by Al-Houthi, there is an extreme suffocation of the camera. Whereas in Aden, we have a space that up until now has not been narrowed as a result of the unstable political condition. No party has full control over the place. Therefore, we are free to go into the streets to shoot and create the contents that we want, but for how long will this last? The whole thing in Yemen for the camera is that it is not only connected to the general condition of the breathing or choking of the camera, but also the political situation. So, with a change in the political climate, everything else will change as well overnight. At the moment, we are able to move, shoot, and let the camera breathe in some areas, but for how long will this continue? Honestly, I do not know. The problem is that it's difficult in most parts of the country.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*What were the challenges you faced in distributing your films nationally and internationally?*

**Amr Gamal**

There are many issues, for example, political ones. Locally, I could only screen the film in Aden. It was very difficult to screen it in the capital, Sana'a, due to the current political system there. In Taiz, we tried to screen the film, started putting up ads in the streets, and arranged a lot of things, but religious extremists threatened the crew, saying that they would ban the film, and they burned the ads in the streets and stopped them from being published. We also tried to screen the film in Hadramaut, but things there were very complicated. There was no good and clear understanding with the concerned authorities there, or even the people themselves, and they asked us for huge fees, because people in Yemen always have this misconception that if you succeed greatly, it means that you have a lot of money. This perception is wrong because if you exchange all the revenue into dollars, you will discover that you have earned nothing. On the contrary, you pay more than what you earned to make your film come out in the best way. This calculation is simple, and you can prove it using a pen and paper. Ultimately, local challenges included the political situation, religious extremism, and lack of knowledge that impeded distribution.

Internationally, because the film was the first simple work to shed light on us as a country,

**Amr Gamal**

it hasn't been heard much. I hope the second film will be better off and the third will later be the best case. Especially since we hear now about the existence of other films coming from Yemen. When more than one film producer works in feature films, it is possible that this could open a door for Yemeni cinema, that it is outside the scope of the local, and begins to have distribution abroad and competition internally. The same is happening on TV now with competition between channels, from Al-Yemen Shabab channel, Al-Saeeda channel, Al-Ghad Al-Mashriq channel, and Al-Mahariya channel. So, people watch them and start to memorize the channels to follow them. We hope that when there are filmmakers, this will allow us to bypass the problems I mentioned earlier in the distribution, because it is in demand on the street and easier to be distributed.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*What should filmmakers in Yemen focus on to introduce cinema as a culture?*

**Amr Gamal**

They should first have a commitment to shooting short films, whether by a camera or on a phone. When more people screen films of different formats, such as shorts, features, or documentary films, and start to present them in local or international festivals and events, they should prepare ways to show the films on social media and YouTube. That will cause the word "film" to be frequently used. People still make mistakes by using the words "series" or "play", and then correcting it to "film", owing to the fact that people in Yemen have got used to the culture of plays and series. The word "film" is rarely used in society because people are not familiar with it. So, the youth should produce more films in order for the word "film" to be well-known.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Do our society, its customs and traditions play a role in weakening the film industry in Yemen?*

**Amr Gamal**

Yes, certainly, traditions, societal conservatism, and narrow-mindedness can be obstacles for artists and drama makers in television, cinema, and theater in choosing bold topics, due to fear of societal backlash and online bullying towards the production crew. For example, if a significant issue is boldly raised such as a thorny political or social issue, you immediately find an attack on social media and insults to filmmakers, actors or actresses who participated in it, and sometimes it reaches the point of threats. These things make the filmmakers, actors and actresses cautious in presenting crucial and controversial issues to avoid the community's responses, particularly since Yemen is currently in an unstable security situation, and there are sometimes fears that the reaction will lead to physical harm. Certainly, discussing normal topics does not move the art industry forward and turns it into a solid mass that does not play its vital role in raising issues and bringing to light what is hidden under the table. Therefore, we must confront our fears of customs and traditions and stop worrying too much about the audience's reaction and their bullying on social media to move forward and present serious and real issues, which is the main role of filmmaking.

**Fatima Al-Absi**

*Where do you see the international co-production situation changing, if any, in the coming 10 years? And where do you see yourself and the Yemeni film industry in the coming years?*

**Amr Gamal**

I don't know if you mean co-production with the Yemenis, because we are still at the beginning of the road. I think that there is news nowadays about Sarah Ishaq's new film,

## **Amr Gamal**

and she is going on with it as a co-production with more than one country. As for us, we are still in co-production with Sudan as of this moment. We also got some offers from other countries, and other co-producers to co-create the film with us. In general, this is a natural result of every step that you develop by, and all the content you provide with a very local, general cinematic content. Because people want to see Yemen, but in a language that reaches all people in the world, not just with a local character and flavor. Like a comedian, I love comedy, and I do a lot of comedy, but I mean works that are understood only by Yemeni society. People want to see work that is related to the local Yemeni community, but that can also reach others abroad.

Once you make films like that, and these works get attention from abroad, co-production begins. And here the Yemeni cinema begins to shine, because there is a local audience and films of a local character presented by the community, its problems, and its stories, but in a way that can reach all people in the world. This is where co-production begins, and here cinema stands out and becomes better. I think that if Sarah and we succeed in the coming period, this will motivate many young people to try to follow in our steps, and outperform us too. I believe that there are many young people who are able to outdo and surpass us, because there are many creative people in Yemen who have much to offer, but they need encouragement and determination.

Where do I see myself in ten years? I hope that I have made more than three or four additional films so that I can leave behind a cinematic legacy, and not just be the owner of two films. I'd like to have at least six to eight films to leave behind and be proud of.

Thank you.

- May 14, 2022

**by** **Fatima Al-Absi (fatimaalabsi00@gmail.com)** is a video editor, prospective filmmaker, and English teacher. She is a fellow of the 2022 International Film Business Academy at the Busan Asian Film School.

## 2022 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals

# Asian Film Commissions Network

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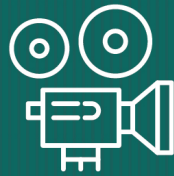


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521, Suyeong-ro, Suyeong-gu, Busan, Korea (48262)  
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