

2023 AFiS Interview Collection :

Interviews with 18

Asian Film Professionals

Tanveer HOSSAIN



Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

WU Hongwei



Armin RAHIMINEZHAD

OH Sodam



Nadine ASMAR

Haziqah BINTI AZEMI



Eleanor TEH

Munkhkhishig DASHTSEREN

Prabin Kumar RAWAT

Rahul AIJAZ

Kristine DE LEON

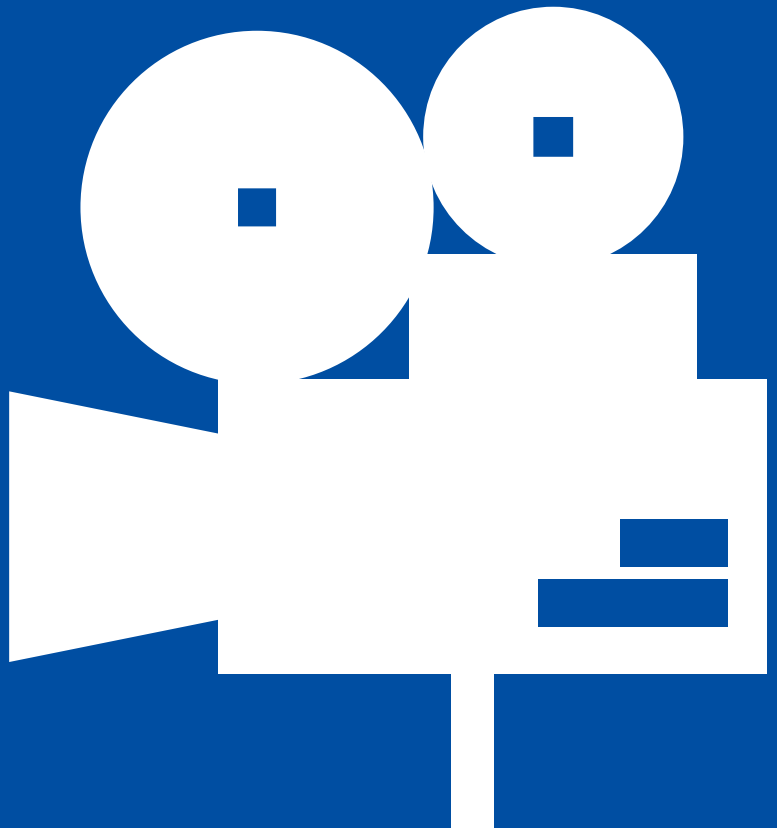
Regina TEO

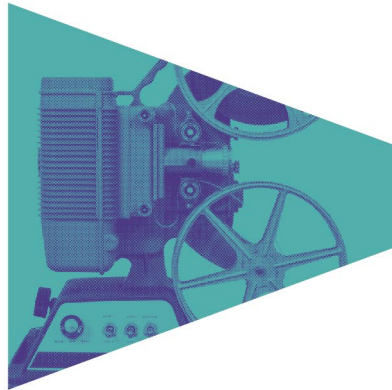
TAN Shu-Ying, Regina

Nayomi KUMARASINGHE

Bavaneedha LOGANATHAN

NGUYEN Hong Quan





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We Produce Producers,

CONTENTS

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|---|
| 006 | BANGLADESH
Interview with AFSANA MIMI
by Tanveer HOSSAIN | 090 | PAKISTAN
Interview with SERAJ US SALIKIN
by Rahul AIJAZ |
| 014 | BANGLADESH
Interview with ISHTIAQUE ZICO
by Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR | 098 | PHILIPPINES
Interview with DOLLY DE LEON
by Kristine DE LEON |
| 026 | CHINA
Interview with ISABELLE GLACHANT
by WU Hongwei | 106 | SINGAPORE
Interview with HUANG JUNXIANG
by Regina TEO |
| 038 | IRAN
Interview with ADEL TABRIZI
by Armin RAHIMINEZHAD | 114 | SINGAPORE
Interview with LAI WEIJIE
by TAN Shu-Ying, Regina |
| 044 | KOREA
Interview with KIM HONG-JOON
by OH Sodam | 122 | SRI LANKA
Interview with JAGATH MANUWARNA
KODITHUWAKKU
by Nayomi KUMARASINGHE |
| 052 | LEBANON
Interview with RANA EID
by Nadine ASMAR | 126 | SRI LANKA
Interview with PRASANNA VITHANAGE
by Bavaneedha LOGANATHAN |
| 062 | MALAYSIA
Interview with HO YUHANG, LEE YVE VONN
by Haziqah BINTI AZEMI | 138 | VIETNAM
Interview with LY THAI DUNG
by NGUYEN Hong Quan |
| 068 | MALAYSIA
Interview with LEONARD TEE
by Eleanor TEH | | |
| 076 | MONGOLIA
Interview with ZOLJARGAL PUREVDASH
by Munkhkhishig DASHTSEREN | | |
| 084 | NEPAL
Interview with ABINASH BIKRAM SHAH
by Prabin Kumar RAWAT | | |

PREFACE

One year ago, the Busan Asian Film School (AFiS) published its first book of interviews, titled *2022 AFiS Interview Collection: Interviews with 33 Asian Film Professionals*. The book contained transcripts of conversations with a range of filmmakers from across the Asian region, working in production, investment, marketing, festivals, distribution, and various other sectors of the industry. Together, the interviews provided readers with unique insight into many aspects of filmmaking in the Asian region.

This year we return with a second volume, *2023 AFiS Interview Collection: Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals*. The interviews contained within this book were conducted by fellows of the 2023 International Film Business Academy as a part of their coursework. The smaller number of interviews contained within this year's collection reflects the IFBA's return to a fully offline program, as opposed to the hybrid online-offline program of 2022 which accepted a larger number of fellows.

As with the 2022 collection, we believe that the interviews contained within this book can be an important resource for anyone who wishes to work in, or more fully understand, the diverse film industries of the Asian region. The interviewees, all of whom are important figures in their respective industries, have generously shared their knowledge and expertise gained from years of practical experience in the field. Within these pages are insights that cannot be learned from any textbook.

As a school devoted to international exchange and the further development of film industries in Asia, we believe it is important to share information and better understand the differences and points of commonality between countries. Fellows at AFiS are trained in producing and other aspects of the filmmaking process, but we also strive to impart fellows with a deeper understanding of the various systems, practices and policies that exist in different Asian film industries. In that sense, a book like this is very closely connected to the fundamental aims of the Busan Asian Film School.

In the years since it welcomed its first batch in 2017, AFiS's International Film Business Academy has graduated over 140 fellows who have already gone on to record various accomplishments on the film festival circuit and in

their local film industries. Through the knowledge they have gained at the school and the connections they have built— including the official alumni network, the New Asian Producers Network (NAPNet) — we anticipate that in the future, AFiS graduates will continue making significant contributions to the further development of Asian film industries.

We'd like to extend warm thanks to all of the interviewees for being so generous with their time, insight and passion for film; to the fellows for their hard work in conducting and transcribing these interviews; to the staff at AFiS for preparing this work for publication; and to the Busan Film Commission and the City of Busan for their generous support and for making this book possible.

Darcy Paquet

International Film Business Academy, Busan Asian Film School



AFSANA MIMI

Actor / Screenwriter / Director / Producer

Bangladesh

Interview by Tanveer HOSSAIN



Afsana Mimi, a graduate from the University of Dhaka, embarked on her journey in the performing arts with a strong focus on drama. She dedicated thirty years of her career to theater, collaborating with renowned groups, including a repertory. Before venturing into a producing role, Mimi spent decades working in television and independent arthouse films, establishing herself as one of the most celebrated actors in the industry. She portrayed key roles in critically acclaimed films, telefilms, and television fictions. Additionally, she enjoyed a prolific career as a voice and dubbing artist for mainstream cinema and radio dramas. Mimi's talents extended to hosting and presenting programs, where she left a significant impact.

After achieving remarkable success in her acting career, Afsana Mimi decided to explore new horizons. She transitioned into writing, directing, and producing various audiovisual productions, including television commercials, documentaries, one-off dramas, serials, and telefilms. Afsana Mimi, an eminent actor turned director, has been the driving force behind several organizations and played a pivotal role in revolutionizing television dramas by breaking away from conventional norms and shaping the current trend. Over the past 17 years, Mimi directed more than 1400 episodes of TV fiction and non-fiction as a director-producer. Additionally, she directed several short films for television. She is also preparing for future film projects, including international co-productions.

Currently, Mimi holds the position of Director of the Department of Drama and Film at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts). Mimi envisions nurturing a new generation that will uphold the nation's culture and pride in the future. With this vision in mind, she established an organization called 'Ichchhetola,' offering art and crafts, music, dance, voice and accent training, as well as ethics classes in a fun and engaging manner for children.



Tanveer Hossain

First of all, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to speak with me. How are you?

Afsana Mimi

I'm doing well. Thank you for joining me in this wonderful conversation as well. I feel honored.

Tanveer Hossain

As far as I know, you have had a successful career in various fields of Bangladesh's audiovisual industry for quite some time. So how has this long journey been for you, from the theater stage to where you are today?

Afsana Mimi

(Laughs) Whether it's been successful or not, I'm not sure yet. To me, meaningfulness matters more than success. If I had to put it simply, I'd say it's been good. I've enjoyed and continue to enjoy this path. In my early days, I was involved in theater stage plays, inspired by my mother. That's where it all began. Then, after a while, I had the opportunity to work in television. At that time, television was not just a new device; it was a whole new experience. There was only one terrestrial TV channel. So, I had to understand what television was and how things worked here. Gradually, I became a regular on television.

After that, there was a long period of acting, modeling for commercials, and so on. Even when working in front of the camera, I always made an effort to understand what was happening behind the scenes. Theater education played a crucial role. If you don't have a proper understanding of what's happening behind the curtain, the work in front of the curtain won't be meaningful. So, whatever happened, I was part of the team that came together in those early days of television, people behind the camera who told stories in their own way, and it was enjoyable. I loved it.

I fell in love with it despite its challenges. Perhaps, it's the love that has kept me involved in this creative process for such a long time. Besides those, event hosting, recitation, or dubbing for films, I've always enjoyed doing these kinds of work. To be honest, if I didn't like a job, I couldn't continue doing it. Then, I got the responsibility of being the Director of the Department of Drama and Film at an institution like Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts). I feel honored, and I'm trying my best. So, life goes on...

Tanveer Hossain

Whenever you have been at the forefront of any endeavor, you often transitioned into a new role. For example, from an actress to a filmmaker. Why is that?

Afsana Mimi

Well, it's not exactly like that. You see, the stage is such a place that once you become a part of it, you never really leave. You form a deep connection with the stage, a relationship with the artist inside you. I started my journey in the television industry around 1990/91, initially as a newcomer trying to embrace a new experience as an actress. Sometimes it led to the next step, a new character, or a different stage with a different play. However, it's not accurate to say I left the stage behind to be available for television. It was quite the opposite. I distanced myself from the stage as a result of a particular experience that left me deeply wounded. Later, I became a regular on television. And the switch from acting to filmmaking was an extremely creative endeavor. It was through this creative medium that I found myself constantly inspired. I'm someone who has always been passionate about literature since childhood. In the realm of filmmaking, I not only delved into

Afsana Mimi literature but also explored more creative facets such as character development, art direction, costume design, and music. I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to engage with diverse artistic disciplines. I don't see it as an attempt to move from one place to another but rather as an artist's journey to self-discovery.

Tanveer Hossain *Why didn't you become a regular in advertising or cinema as a filmmaker?*

Afsana Mimi Actually, when I started producing advertisements, the era of storytelling-based advertisements had not yet arrived in our country. But I wanted to move away from the stereotype of jingle-based advertisements. So, I tried to create storytelling-based advertisements that broke away from the norm. Clients or agencies were more inclined towards jingle-based advertisements at that time. I didn't feel a strong connection to advertising then. I didn't think of it as my place. That's why I didn't pursue a regular career in that field. On the other hand, I didn't become a regular in the film industry either. Perhaps I wasn't mature enough to regularly participate in filmmaking. Now, I understand better. I understand what I didn't understand before. So, now I am slowly preparing myself for that journey.

Tanveer Hossain *In Bangladesh, you played a pivotal role in revolutionizing television dramas. Could you share your thoughts and inspiration behind breaking away from the conventional norms and creating a new trend over an extended period of time?*

Afsana Mimi Before venturing into television fiction production, I worked as an actress in the television industry for quite some time. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to collaborate with exceptionally talented filmmakers and co-artists. Although I didn't have formal training in film school, I learned the craft through practical experience from artists who were ahead of their time, and I believe in following their principles. What I realize now is that during our time, senior artists or highly skilled storytellers didn't just teach technical aspects but imparted a deeper understanding of self-awareness and values. Understanding what kind of lens to use came much later for me, but I learned the essence of self-awareness, values, and philosophy from the very beginning. Even before delving into the technical intricacies of a particular shot, I sought to understand the philosophy behind it. That's why when I started production, I didn't imitate; instead, I learned to embrace a long-term vision, culture, values, and self-awareness. It was not about breaking stereotypes but about rewarding my own thoughts.

When I began making television dramas, single-episode fiction or short serials were prevalent. Since I had an interactive relationship with the audience as an actress, I could understand that they enjoyed observing the progression of characters on a regular basis in stories.

That's where the idea of daily soaps and long-running serials originated. It's not that I discovered this method; I simply applied it to our own stories. Later on, it became a trend. Undoubtedly, the audience's embrace of this format is what sustains it, and it's not solely attributed to my introduction of it. Similarly, the choice of Valentine's Day for romantic storylines was not arbitrary; it naturally fit into the ongoing narrative. I thought Valentine's Day inherently involves a romantic atmosphere, perfect for romantic telefilms or one-off fictions. I felt that there was a subtle connection between these stories and the

Afsana Mimi atmosphere, and that's why it eventually became a trend.

Tanveer Hossain *Many talented actors and technicians have entered our industry under your guidance. What motivates you to collaborate with newcomers?*

Afsana Mimi The reason is quite simple and natural. Newcomers bring freshness to the industry, and I find that very appealing. Additionally, when I was relatively new, my predecessors paved the way for me, and in some cases, even created paths for me. So, I feel a deep sense of responsibility towards the new generation. They bring fresh perspectives and innovation, which are essential for the growth and evolution of our industry. Moreover, I've always emphasized self-reflection. Looking at it from another perspective, I regret that I couldn't make more progress as a novice when I had all those opportunities. It's as if my juniors have more room to excel than I did, and I feel an urge to support them. However, whether it be an artist or a technician, it all depends on their qualifications. The biggest proof of this is that most of them are now established in their own right. I can open the door for someone, but they have to walk the path beyond the door with their own abilities.

Tanveer Hossain *You have worked in various eras of the industry as an actress. How was it then, and how is it now? Where do you think the main difference lies, and why?*

Afsana Mimi Our film and television industry is not that old in the true sense. It hasn't changed significantly for a long time, but it has evolved. When I started as an actress, Bangladesh Television was the only place for entertainment on the screen. Later, with the advent of private TV channels, Simon Dring played a pivotal role in bringing about a revolutionary change in our audiovisual landscape.

The transition period brought both positive and negative changes. The number of TV channels has increased, meaning more opportunities for us to showcase our work. But, there hasn't been much coordination in terms of program design among these channels. Most channels seem to follow similar content, leading to a quantitative competition rather than a qualitative one. As a result, budgets, along with the quality of audiovisual content, have decreased. However, I see a positive side to this transition as well. The competition in the television industry has increased, which could lead to better content if properly utilized. I still believe, despite these challenges, television can still be a great platform if used effectively.

Storytelling has faced a significant setback in terms of literary value. To make a cinematic production praiseworthy, it is necessary to have a literary aspect, which is hardly seen nowadays. This is the most significant difference. In the past, this aspect was highly regarded in the industry. Then came the era of the internet, YouTube content, and the race for views. In this digital age, we couldn't fully adapt. The audience has divided preferences. Some rely solely on internet-based content like OTT, some only on television, while others prefer traditional cinema. This fragmentation of the audience has complicated matters. However, I believe that the digital OTT platform is a fantastic medium for experimentation and healthy competition.

What hasn't been conducive over the last 20 years is the growth of the workforce at the same rate as the increasing number of TV channels and production companies. Many

Afsana Mimi people are working, but having the right person in the right position remains a significant challenge. This is a major obstacle. Moreover, despite the transition from terrestrial television to multiplexes and celluloid films to digital, the quality and depth of storytelling has taken a hit. Ensuring quality content in the face of time and budget constraints and the shortage of skilled writers is another challenge.

In the midst of all this, although our literary discussions have suffered due to technology-driven distractions, I still see a lot of promising work being done, and I'm an optimist. The work of many young talents inspires me, even amidst all these challenges. I see great potential in their work.

Tanveer Hossain *In such a scenario, what are the main obstacles to producing internationally recognized films, and how can we progress in this field?*

Afsana Mimi While we are creating films for the international stage, our main hurdle is the lack of a benchmark or standard. Whenever we try to imitate foreign cinematic styles, we often find ourselves lagging behind. To make our mark internationally, we need to establish our unique benchmark by presenting our original stories, deeply rooted in our culture, in a way that resonates with a global audience. It's a difficult task but not impossible. Young talents like Abdullah Mohammad Saad and Nuhash Humayun have been consistently doing this.

Additionally, there are two major shortcomings we face in our journey to produce internationally acclaimed films. One is the absence of a comprehensive film school, and the other is the lack of a film commission. A well-rounded film school could guide us in understanding and setting our own benchmarks or standards. On the other hand, a film commission could facilitate international co-productions and various development labs, which could significantly contribute to the growth of our film industry.

Tanveer Hossain *How do you view new media?*

Afsana Mimi I wouldn't call myself an expert on this subject, but to the best of my understanding, I consider OTT as a platform for a new revolution. At the best, YouTube and Vimeo, I can consider along with it. I've embraced it and consider it a positive development. New media, especially OTT, has opened the door to endless possibilities for us. It's highly empowering for viewers as they can choose what they want to watch, where, and at what cost. This encourages healthy competition and the creation of quality content. However, I don't include other social media platforms like TikTok or Facebook, a medium of expressing work that has art value. They are more for entertainment rather than artistic expression. This is just my personal perspective.

Tanveer Hossain *In the context of our audiovisual industry's progress, what would you suggest for a stop-start-continue approach?*

Afsana Mimi As I've mentioned before, I feel that there are individuals who are doing significant work in various places. That's why I would stop those who are not doing meaningful work initially, then start film schools, and film commissions through the right individuals. I would continue by preserving the art and philosophy of the past in our work. Some people are

Afsana Mimi still continuing that. If they didn't, where would we be?

Tanveer Hossain *How do you perceive the role of censorship? How important is it to have a censor board?*

Afsana Mimi Personally, I don't consider having a censor board as crucial. The current state of censor boards is far from ideal. Here, the presence of a particular demographic in the film industry could be relevant only to determine whether a film is suitable for any age group. A rating system is a much-needed modern approach. The word "censorship" itself implies a certain level of restriction that leads to a mindset of creating barriers.

Tanveer Hossain *What is the government's plan for the overall film industry in the country? As the Director of the Department of Film and Drama, if you could elaborate....*

Afsana Mimi There are numerous plans and intentions by the honorable government regarding the film industry. However, as I mentioned earlier, the lack of qualified individuals is a significant hurdle. Despite having these plans and budgets, it seems that they are not being effectively implemented due to the scarcity of capable personnel. The National Film Grants for independent cinema is a crucial aspect where the government is making a significant impact. This grant is clearly making a big difference to our independent cinemas to patronize good stories and create new filmmakers, and the process of obtaining this funding is gradually becoming less complicated.

In addition to supporting the film industry, the government is also deeply committed to promoting cultural values and the arts. As you may be aware, we have established an Academy of Fine Arts in every district of Bangladesh. When harnessed effectively, this collective network represents a substantial asset. With the right workforce, these academies have the potential to bring about significant transformations in each district. Therefore, the government has laid a solid foundation and possesses the necessary goodwill to achieve these goals. The government can set policies and provide assistance in infrastructure development, but the main work is still up to us.

Tanveer Hossain *You established a private film academy. Could you tell us more about that?*

Afsana Mimi Learning cinema hands-on is undoubtedly an expensive endeavor. I often dream of establishing a comprehensive film academy in our country, one that sets a benchmark and propels our cinema forward. However, creating such an institution from scratch is far from easy. I myself started modestly, initially focusing solely on the acting department. Even that proved quite expensive for a small institution like ours. Moreover, motivating students to invest their time, intellect, and money in learning acting without the safety net of formal education can be challenging.

When they see individuals succeeding without formal training, they may perceive it as a shortcut to success and believe that networking holds more value than time, talent, and financial investment. Unfortunately, our field has not been an exception to this trend. While singing, dancing, and other artistic pursuits require formal education, a dynamic medium like acting demands more than just talent too. I'm not suggesting that those who do it without training are inept; many have excelled in the profession without formal education. However, neglecting the theoretical and practical aspects of acting can

Afsana Mimi

undermine the foundation of this profession in the long run. You may reach a certain level without formal training, but without a strong foundation, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain and advance in this field. This is why I appreciate the value of experience, as every experience teaches and molds us, often making us better than before. It may not always lead to success, but it is undoubtedly a valuable asset.

However, in pursuit of this endeavor, I also founded "Ichchhetola." This achievement holds immense personal significance for me.

Tanveer Hossain

What motivated you to initiate this endeavor of Ichchhetola? What do you see in the future here?

Afsana Mimi

I felt a strong desire to do something for children. When working at the film academy, I realized that, before formal training in acting or filmmaking, it's crucial to nurture their imagination and artistic sense. The seed needs to be sown during childhood itself. This is why I initiated Ichchhetola (Wishland), a place where children can experiment with art and craft according to their wishes. They won't be tied down by syllabuses or grades. Instead, they will find encouragement to follow their passions. It's about creating a space where creativity can flourish freely without the pressure of exams and competitions. I believe this kind of nurturing at an early age can lead to innovative artists and thinkers in the future.

Tanveer Hossain

Finally, I'd like to know – among the roles of actor, producer, administrator, and academician, which one would you like to stick with until the end, and why?

Afsana Mimi

If I had to choose, I would want to stick with the role of an actor until the end. Yes, I've played various roles in my life when necessity arose, and I still do. But the actor within me has never died. This profession has given me the opportunity to live multiple lifetimes within one. What more could I ask for?

by

Tanveer Hossain (post2tanveer@gmail.com) is an emerging film producer hailing from Bangladesh. His inaugural feature project *The Wrestler* has already earned acclaim by clinching the prestigious New Currents Award at the 2023 Busan International Film Festival. The project previously secured the National Film Grant of Bangladesh in 2021. Tanveer has also participated in numerous global platforms including the Asian Project Market, Cannes Co-production Day, NFDC Film Bazaar Co-production Market, Produire Au Sud, and the West Meets East Screenplay Lab.

In addition to his debut feature, several short films produced by Tanveer have been officially selected for various international festivals. He has also written and produced hundreds of TV dramas, along with a few TV commissioned short films, and has contributed to over a hundred TV commercials over the past 17 years.

In 2023 Tanveer graduated as a fellow from the International Film Business Academy (IFBA) at the Busan Asian Film School, earning the Busan Film Commission Award for exceptional performance during the fellowship. He is also an alumnus of the Producers' Workshop, part of NFDC Film Bazaar 2023, and the Asian Producer's Network, a program at the Singapore International Film Festival 2023.

With an expanding portfolio of successful projects and an unwavering commitment to continuous learning and collaboration, Tanveer Hossain is poised to make a substantial impact on the film industry, both domestically and on the international stage.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals





ISHTIAQUE ZICO

Director / Educator

Bangladesh

Interview by Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR (Fazle Hasan SHISHIR)



Ishtiaque Zico graduated from Dhaka University with a degree in Mathematics. He first became involved in filmmaking in the early 2000s by producing and directing short films and assisting on works by other directors. In 2010 his short *720 Degrees* became the first Bangladeshi film invited to the Orizzoni competition section of the Venice Film Festival. In the following year he also participated in the Berlinale Talents program. Since then he has continued to work on films in various capacities, but has shifted his focus to pedagogy, launching numerous influential film collectives and non-traditional educational programs.



Md. Fazle Hasan

SHISHIR

Ishtiaque Zico

How did you start your filmmaking journey?

After a two decade, multidisciplinary career, I feel like I haven't truly embarked on my filmmaking journey yet. (laughs) Or better to say, I began engaging in filmmaking as part of a process of self-discovery, an extension of my intellectual curiosity, which is a journey I am still on.

Picture me: a mathematics student at Dhaka University, decoding the mysteries of space-time through mathematical symbols. One day, upset after an exam, I stumbled into a local film festival. There, I experienced a documentary called *The Happiest People in the World*, directed by Shaheen Dill Riaz. That cinematic experience propelled me from being a passive spectator to an engaged interpreter, opening my eyes to the captivating world of audiovisual symbols. That was in the early 2000s, and it led me to direct my first short film, *Oshopno*, made with some friends.

Filmmaking for me isn't about following trends or creating pretty pictures. It became a complex canvas, as intricate as the mathematical problems I was accustomed to solving. I found in cinema a unique intersection where disciplines like technology, philosophy, anthropology, economics, and more could intertwine. This cinematic medium offered a unique lens to examine power dynamics, delve into the human condition, and appreciate the beauty of minimalism.

Now, let's not romanticize the journey. After graduating, I worked in various film crew positions, such as assistant director, editor, cinematographer, sound designer, and producer. I saw firsthand how the industry works, including its unglamorous side, which can often neglect workers' rights. My short film *720 Degrees* was recognized at some festivals, but this led to unforeseen pressure to meet others' expectations, something I struggled with. I learned that it's not just about the accolades; it's about understanding myself and accepting my limitations.

So, here I am, two decades in, and the journey still feels like the beginning. I'm still that curious student, eager and inquisitive, still searching, still growing, still challenging myself. I'm not interested in reaching a destination; I'm more interested in the journey itself, the process of discovery and experimentation.

Md. Fazle Hasan

SHISHIR

Your short film 720 Degrees is the only Bangladeshi film to premiere at the Venice Film Festival and be nominated for the Orizzonti Award. Can you briefly mention your experience regarding this film?

Ishtiaque Zico

Sure. *720 Degrees* was a transformative experience — a brutal and beautiful lesson in what it means to be a filmmaker. The film was a one-take study of identity politics and the paradox of world leaders preaching peace through conflict and war. We shot it on 35mm celluloid with limited equipment, amateur actors, one location, and a single day of shooting. But these constraints forced us to be creative.

The film's premiere at the 67th Venice Film Festival was surreal. I was proud, but also overwhelmed by the attention. The Orizzonti Award nomination was a validation of our cinematic experiment, and it opened the doors to broader conversations within the

Ishtiaque Zico

Bangladeshi film community. The festival was also a harsh reality check. I wandered around distributing leaflets, feeling alienated, trying to promote my film among peers, and struggling with my own artistic identity. I felt like a salesman trying to sell my soul, echoing Tarkovsky's notion about cinema's metamorphosis into a commodity, marketed like cigarettes. The Venice recognition also came with pressure. I felt like I was being thrust onto a stage, naked and unprepared. I was expected to outperform, to create something bigger, better, and more profound. It shook me to my core, planting seeds of self-doubt.

The aftermath was a journey in itself. The accolades can both elevate and paralyze an independent filmmaker. I lost that innocent love for cinema. I became obsessed with self-image, burdened by my own success. It took years to shake it off and find myself again. But there were also lessons, invaluable lessons. I learned to appreciate film festivals as markets and networking hubs for industry stakeholders. I learned not to judge a film by its laurels and to see the industry's struggles and festival strategies.

Most importantly, *720 Degrees* taught me about the delicate balance between aspiration and authenticity. It reminded me that success isn't about applause; it's about finding your voice, embracing your path, and having the courage to share your vision, no matter the odds. Long story short, *720 Degrees* wasn't just a film; it was a mirror — reflecting my fears, flaws, and strengths. It was my love letter to the cinema.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

You started your career as a filmmaker and then you switched your focus to educating young talents and curating film programs for them. What made you more interested in the latter field?

Ishtiaque Zico

It's funny how life takes you down unexpected paths. For me, it all began with a simple realization that pedagogy might be a better fit. I started as a film crew member, and the more I worked, the more I realized that I enjoyed teaching. Maybe even more than making films myself. Since I don't have a formal film degree, I learned everything on set, in editing rooms, or through critical discussions. These experiences became my classroom. I remember wanting to grow, to learn more, but existing film appreciation or filmmaking courses out there didn't resonate with my reality or the reality of my fellow aspiring young filmmakers. That's when I understood that something was missing, something more rooted in local practice and actual support.

Then I noticed how university-based film clubs were all about appreciating films, but not about making them. They catered to feature-length narratives, celebrated works. That felt so far removed from what working or middle-class youth like us could achieve. That's when the idea of short films struck me. They were within reach, full of raw energy, and, most importantly, attainable. When I started curating and discussing them, the positive response fueled my confidence.

So, in 2007, I took the initiative and formed a collective called Rupantor Team. Think of it as an alternative film school, a place for those who couldn't afford traditional media education or who didn't have industry connections. It went beyond peer-to-peer knowledge exchange; it was about building relationships, nurturing talent, and creating community. After *720 Degrees*, I had a chance to attend Berlinale Talents in Germany. The networking

Ishtiaque Zico

there was eye-opening, and the international perspective broadened my horizons. I felt like I was connecting dots, seeing the film discipline from multiple angles. Then came the *5.1 Project* in 2011. Along with five aspiring filmmakers, we embarked on this year-long journey of self-learning, exploring the theme of "undefined relationships." It was creative, it was collaborative, and it was something uniquely ours. We used to travel, brainstorm, and sought local support to produce no-budget exercise films. This project helped me to develop an experimental curriculum and localized pedagogy strategy, influenced by the inclusive approaches to learning of the Makhmalbaf Film School and Werner Herzog's non-technical dialogue exchange.

Later on, I found myself leading the film department at a visual art school. It started as a job, but it grew into something more profound. It was about mentoring, about helping young filmmakers find their voices. Over 400 students passed through my courses, and each one added to my own learning journey. I also got a chance to institutionalize my lessons learned and best practices from my experimental curriculum.

And that led me to initiate Biralpakhi Club and Biralpakhir Mojma, a seamless extension of my love for cinema. It's not just a club or an event; it's a community, a platform for nurturing and showcasing underserved local talent.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

What pushed you towards the idea of Biralpakhir Mojma? What was the primary idea for that collective?

Ishtiaque Zico

Biralpakhir Mojma wasn't something I planned overnight; it was the result of years of observation, teaching, and understanding the challenges that aspiring media entrepreneurs face, especially in Bangladesh. During my time as an institutional teacher, I recognized the limitations of traditional learning. The curriculum often seemed disconnected from reality, slow to adapt to a fast-changing world. I found teaching methods to be passive, and the learning environment was not always conducive to creativity or critical thinking. I saw a divide between theory and practice, resistance to new pedagogy, and a lack of collaboration between academia and practitioners. There was an urgent need for a platform where filmmakers could break free from these constraints.

Seeing my popularity in institutionalized teaching, friends and fellows suggested I start a new film school due to the demand for my teachings, but I sensed that it could lead to more conformity. Instead, I wanted to create something that would truly empower filmmakers—a community to unlearn. Biralpakhir Mojma is this space, this community of unlearners. It's a place where filmmakers come together to shed stereotypes, to experiment, and to ignite innovation. The unlearning was about cultivating an environment where new possibilities and new connections can thrive.

Biralpakhir Mojma also emerged from a need for an avant-garde space where new cinema could be cultivated in Bangladesh. I saw a dismissive attitude between the industry and auteurs, between young film professionals and senior serious cinephiles, a gap between film practitioners and practitioners of other disciplines, and I wanted to create a space where these groups could interact, breaking down barriers between industry standards and personal taste, audience demand, and entrepreneurial

Ishtiaque Zico

aspirations. My role was more like an experience designer. So, Biralpakhir Mojma was more than a network event. It's about making filmmaking an attainable dream, a platform for creativity, and a celebration of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

Can you tell more about the design of each Mojma session?

Ishtiaque Zico

Absolutely, I'd love to. Designing each Mojma has been an inspiring journey for me. Over 33 months, we orchestrated 17 rounds, each crafted around a particular theme and structured into three parts: open discourse, open cinema, and open mic.

The open discourse segment was the opening act, a confession from seasoned industry experts from various disciplines. We invited them to share their insights and experiences with aspiring filmmakers, whom I view as media entrepreneurs and creative freelancers. Instead of the usual rehearsed speeches, we encouraged them to step out of their comfort zones and speak from the heart. I made sure they felt safe in expressing their uncensored feelings and views, even helping them in research and message articulation. This part was like forming a thesis, the groundwork for the entire session, and I'm truly grateful to those experts who embraced my vision for this platform.

Next came the open cinema segment, a space for raw creativity and innovation. Here, storytellers were given a chance to present their experimental shorts, guided by a loose theme and maximum duration. This wasn't about polished works; it was about sincere artistic expressions and voices often unheard due to lack of formal education or credentials. I sought to balance the look of honest confession with innovative audiovisual expressions. I referred to this as the anti-thesis, showcasing the raw, artistic caliber instead of technical craft.

Lastly, we concluded with the open mic sessions, where we encouraged interactive discussions and debates. This was an alternative cine-education, or unlearning session, for both industry professionals and novices. It was the synthesis, allowing for a rich interaction and deeper understanding of the theme.

Each Mojma was an evolving journey. From thesis to anti-thesis, culminating in synthesis, it was a dance between theory and practice, guided by a sense of community and the pursuit of something genuinely meaningful. It was a reflection of what the Biralpakhi spirit stands for, a platform that nurtured critical thinking, celebrated innovation, and fostered a strong sense of solidarity. Looking back, I see them as milestones in our collective pursuit of a more vibrant and inclusive cinematic landscape.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

You have seen quite a number of changes in the Bangladeshi filmmaking scene. What are some changes you would like to mention?

Ishtiaque Zico

Oh, where to begin? The Bangladeshi filmmaking landscape has been undergoing some thrilling transformations. Young filmmakers, mostly Gen Z, now have access to a plethora of materials, tutorials, and platforms to understand the craft, trends, and techniques. This has fostered a generation of self-taught creators, who are not just absorbing information, but also putting it into practice. The new generation is experimenting with short videos, sometimes unknowingly innovating in cinematic language, theme, and

Ishtiaque Zico

expression. This fearless approach, less burdened by censorship, is pushing boundaries to some extent.

Now, on the industry side, there's been a commendable rise in the role of formal and informal trade unions. These entities are safeguarding the rights of film crews, promoting fair practices, and enhancing working conditions. Female representation is another area where I see significant change. Women are stepping into roles both in front of and behind the camera. And it's not merely about achieving a quota; it's about amplifying diverse voices, perspectives, and talents.

The emergence of local streaming platforms, along with global platforms like YouTube, has redefined distribution. Filmmakers can now reach their audience more directly, bypassing gatekeepers and allowing for more niche content. It's a game-changer in how we share and consume films. In a more competitive landscape, filmmakers are considering themselves media entrepreneurs, strategizing their releases, and even engaging in international collaborations and co-productions.

However, it's not all rosy. The lack of inclusive infrastructure, economic challenges, and the COVID pandemic have led some talented professionals to leave the film industry or shift their focus to other survival strategies. Also, I've noticed a decline in community engagement among independent filmmakers. There seems to be a trend towards individualism, working in silos, and a reliance on superficial indicators like likes or views.

We are witnessing a dynamic shift in Bangladeshi cinema. There's more entrepreneurial spirit, but also challenges that need addressing.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

You have worked with a number of young talents as well as some renowned filmmakers in Bangladesh. What makes you choose potential talents?

Ishtiaque Zico

Selecting potential talents is a nuanced process, and it goes beyond mere technical skills or a flashy portfolio. What I primarily seek is a flexible mindset. In an ever-changing industry, adaptability and openness to new ideas are paramount. I value talents who are willing to embrace change, innovate, and evolve.

Critical thinking is another vital aspect. I look for individuals who can analyze, question, and reflect not only on their work but also on the broader world. Their ability to think critically enriches the storytelling, adding depth and complexity. Collaboration lies at the heart of filmmaking, and I appreciate talents who embrace this spirit. Those who respect diverse opinions and are open to feedback. Beyond these qualities, I'm drawn to those driven by a sincere commitment to the project rather than mere vanity metrics.

Lastly, gender responsiveness and cultural awareness are non-negotiable for me. I seek talents who understand and practice gender sensitivity and who possess empathy for various cultural nuances. These qualities don't just enrich the content; they contribute to a more inclusive and respectful working environment.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

You were working on your first feature film, titled Cinema, City & Cats. Which state are you in with that project?

Ishtiaque Zico

Cinema, City & Cats is more than just a project to me; it's an exploration of the idea that there are many ways one can identify as Bangladeshi. I wanted to delve into how society perceives and treats marginalized identities, to go beyond the surface and understand the complex interplay between individuals and society. The project reached early pre-production after being pitched at the Locarno Open Doors Hub. But for now, it's on hold—a deliberate decision.

Set in Dhaka, the city where I was born, the narrative revolves around three characters. Each is grappling with a unique form of nationalism: a non-Bengali delivery boy, an aging celluloid cinema projectionist, and an Indian Bengali teacher. While developing the project, I came to realize that my approach to critiquing nationalism might be premature for the current political climate in Bangladesh. This led me to pause and reflect on the audiovisual industry and what audiences truly expect from films today.

The journey to this point has been filled with challenging experiences, from better understanding international co-production to balancing family responsibilities, and even dealing with critical mental health issues. But these trials have taught me invaluable lessons about not just filmmaking but life itself. I've also learned that health and life are more important than any film project.

The characters were real and their struggles remain vivid in my mind, even as I've moved from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar. I'm still exploring how to adapt the project to my current reality, considering how to translate it into a format that does justice to its themes. But I can't commit to a timeline right now. I'm grateful for the journey, with all its ups and downs. Sometimes, these unexpected detours lead us to deeper insights into ourselves and the stories we want to tell. That's precisely where I find myself with *Cinema, City & Cats*.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

You also acted as the character Ajit in the Singaporean film A Land Imagined (2018) which won the Golden Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival. Tell us about your experience on this film.

Ishtiaque Zico

Oh, *A Land Imagined* — Playing Ajit was like stepping through a doorway into a whole new world. I was initially just helping out with casting, looking for professional actors from Bangladesh, but when the opportunity to audition came up, I thought, "Why not?" I was both nervous and excited, but it was time to step out of my comfort zone.

The director, Siew Hua Yeo, had a vision that transcended mere storytelling. It was about creating a landscape, a surreal realm where characters were not just individuals but symbols, metaphors, and fragments of a larger, more complex puzzle. I was hooked. Getting the part was thrilling, but becoming Ajit was a fascinating process. I had to adopt a Singaporean English accent and imitate broken, fragmented sentences to portray a Bangladeshi migrant worker. I lived and breathed the role, thanks to the support and respect of my co-actors and the entire team.

The filming was like a dream. Singapore's nighttime landscapes, the gritty construction sites, and surreal sequences took me on a visceral and cerebral journey. It was more than acting; it was living another life. And then, winning the Golden Leopard Award at Locarno

Ishtiaque Zico

was the cherry on top. It was a testament to the collaborative magic of cinematic experiment.

Looking back, *A Land Imagined* was a special film project. It's a reminder of why I fell in love with this medium in the first place. In that sense, it wasn't just a film; it was a masterclass in the art of living, learning, and creating. It reinforced my love for cinema and showed me that embracing the unknown can lead to extraordinary experiences. It's a memory that will always stay with me.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR **Ishtiaque Zico**

What are your thoughts on international co-production for Bangladeshi cinema?

Frankly, international co-production in Bangladeshi cinema is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be a great opportunity. Imagine Bangladeshi filmmakers collaborating with international talents, learning from each other, sharing resources, and gaining fresh perspectives. It's a chance to put Bangladesh on the international cinematic map while creating jobs and boosting our economy.

On the other hand, there are also risks. For example, cultural appropriation. You're working on a project with a foreign producer, and you suddenly realize that they are more interested in appropriating Bangladeshi cultural elements in a problematic way, stereotyping them. You want to maintain artistic control, but the power dynamics are imbalanced. The foreign partner might even have a majority stake or veto power. You find yourself in a bind, possibly compromising your vision. You might even feel like you're caught in a form of neocolonialism, where a more powerful country uses its economic or cultural influence over you. It's a concern, and it's something we need to be aware of.

And then there's the complexity of it all. International co-production is a maze filled with regulations and procedures. For young and inexperienced filmmakers, it can feel overwhelming. You dive in, hoping for smooth sailing from pitching to distribution, but without full awareness, you might face frustrations.

But what about us, here in Bangladesh? Our regulatory landscape needs strengthening. We have to make it equitable for all parties involved. The lack of market data, industry syndicates, and partisan biases can hinder informed decision-making. We need unbiased hubs to support and nurture young talents, providing them with the resources and information to navigate this complex terrain. And a word of advice to filmmakers: Always get legal advice before signing anything. Understand the terms and conditions. Be informed. Remain alert to the underlying market strategies, diplomatic intents, and political agendas behind co-production agreements.

So, international co-production? It can be a boon, a way to grow and flourish. But it can also be a bane, filled with pitfalls and complexities. It's not just a trend; it's a path that requires careful navigation. That's what it means for Bangladeshi cinema.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

After COVID, there have been some substantial changes in the film scene due to the boom of OTT contents. How do you perceive such changes?

Ishtiaque Zico

The OTT landscape is dynamic on a global scale. Think of Netflix for the mainstream audience and Mubi for the art-house crowd. But let's zoom in on Bangladesh and see how OTT fits in here.

First, the positive shift. OTT platforms offer on-demand browsing without YouTube-like ads or TV commercials, streaming high-resolution images and sound. That's refreshing. But if we think of OTT as the new content producers, I have to admit, I'm not as hopeful. See, most local OTT platforms are born from traditional telcos, media houses, or old-school production companies. So, what we're getting is an extension of cable TV or YouTube, just without the ads. Sure, there's more flexibility in word choices in dialogue or graphical content, but the themes? They often feel like a copy-paste from the old TV playbook. We're seeing the same stereotypical representations, and normative biases that cater mainly to the old TV audience.

But local OTT could be so much more. Imagine catering to the arthouse film audience or using new technological possibilities for cinematic experiments. How about interactive cinema controlled by a remote or responsive cinema that changes composition and narrative on different devices? That's where the real potential lies.

I've also heard murmurs about national OTT regulations, but I haven't had a chance to read them. I'm concerned about potential conflicts with constitutional freedoms, like Article 39 on freedom of thought and speech. The national OTT policy and its strategies must involve all stakeholders in the process, ensuring that OTT becomes a platform for innovation, inclusion, and growth. It's not just about what's new; it's about what's next.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

Would you like to mention a few contemporary filmmakers whose work you really look forward to?

Ishtiaque Zico

I've somewhat stopped following contemporary filmmakers in the traditional sense, so it's tough for me to rank or list favorites. But there are a few names I can recall now that have caught my attention. Chaitanya Tamhane, Ronny Sen, Achal Mishra, and Bi Gan – they are contemporary young filmmakers. What I enjoy about their work is how they steer clear of clichés and imposed dramaturgy. They embrace the art of cinema, using poetic narratives.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

What's your plan for the future regarding filmmaking, curating and programming?

Ishtiaque Zico

At this moment, I find myself taking a break from my filmmaking, curating, and programming activities. I am reflecting on my career and envisioning new paths ahead. Remember the Biralpakhi Club? It thrived for three years until 2019. It was a labor of love, self-funded, and centered around community development. It taught me a big lesson about the need for a sustainable business model.

So, what's next? I've got a few ideas brewing. I might reboot the initiative, but with a new twist. I envision a community that is not just focused on filmmaking, but extends to entrepreneurs and innovative thinkers. This reimagined community would emphasize research and advocacy, aligning with a sustainable business model. I've been thinking a lot about Generation Z in Bangladesh. There's a lack of qualitative insights and actionable

Ishtiaque Zico

data about this generation, and I see an opportunity to delve into this untapped territory.

The very definition of cinema is evolving. Have you noticed how the lines between video and cinema are blurring? It's happening everywhere—how we make films, how we watch them, how we discuss them, even how we pay for them. We are witnessing a convergence of mediums, creating a space where independent filmmakers might find new roles as story designers, creative strategists, or even entrepreneurs. Consider the concept of "movie-as-a-service," where movies are experienced not merely as art products but as ongoing services. It's like how software works nowadays. This innovative approach can reshape how we create, curate, and consume cinematic experiences.

So no, I don't have a step-by-step plan laid out, but I'm pretty excited about the future. Whether I end up making a service, curating, programming, or doing something entirely different, I'm open to it. It's a wild time, and I'm just enjoying the ride.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

Your website says that you are an "Innovation Strategist" now. What's your plan regarding "innovation" in cinema?

Ishtiaque Zico

The title "Innovation Strategist" might raise eyebrows in the filmmaking world, but it captures where I believe the future of cinema is heading. For me, innovation is about reimagining what cinema can be, and that's a thrilling prospect. Think of every independent cinema project as a startup. It can carve out its own path with a distinctive business model, tailor-made strategies for engaging audiences, and a unique financial structure. It goes beyond merely embracing new technology; it's about fundamentally reshaping the way we communicate through audiovisual media, through new cinematic vocabulary.

Sustainability is vital, and I'm drawing lessons from my past work to forge innovative paths. I'm looking at OTT platforms, seeing beyond ad-free YouTube channels to envision films as services, not just content or products, but as evolving experiences tailored to individual consumer. This paradigm shift is my driving force. Whether in filmmaking, curating content, or designing services, I'm on a quest to disrupt and innovate. It's a journey filled with uncertainty, excitement, and potential, and I'm wholeheartedly embracing it as I look toward a sustainable future for cinema.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

What motivates you to motivate others?

Ishtiaque Zico

I am flattered. (laughs) Maybe I see human beings as creators and innovators with immense potential, to craft their own path, reimagine their own story, and bring something extraordinary to the world. My role, as I see it, is to act as a catalyst, an assistant, or sometimes even a fellow traveler. I'm motivated by the realization that creativity and innovation aren't confined to certain professional identities. They are intrinsic human qualities. When I see someone break free from the constraints of conventional thinking, when I witness their eyes light up with a newfound understanding or idea, it resonates deeply within me.

In motivating others, I'm not imparting wisdom from a pedestal but engaging in a dialogue, a collaborative exploration. It's about asking questions rather than providing

Ishtiaque Zico

answers, listening rather than dictating, and nurturing rather than directing. The joy of seeing someone discover their voice, the satisfaction of witnessing a project come to life, the shared excitement of innovation – these are the moments that fuel me. They remind me that we are all connected, all part of this beautiful, chaotic, and endlessly fascinating narrative called life.

Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR

Do you have any tips for new Bangladeshi filmmakers who are working independently or in the industry?

Ishtiaque Zico

The Bangladeshi filmmaking scene is like an energetic canvas right now. It's shifting, growing, and brimming with potential. I can feel this wave of hard work and integrity coming from our young filmmakers, and it's downright inspiring. Here are some tips for new filmmakers, whether they are working independently or in the industry:

Find your voice. The world has had enough of the same old stories. What is your unique take on life? Your emotions, experiences, and perspective are what will make your creative effort stand out.

Mix it up with different folks. Don't just hang around with other filmmakers. Engage with underserved communities, tech people, and entrepreneurs. You never know where support and inspiration will come from.

Be your own boss. Think of your film as your startup. Who is your audience? What's your game plan? How will you make it work? Sometimes, consider innovative approaches, even beyond cinema.

Take care of yourself. Filmmaking is thrilling but exhausting. Your mental health is paramount. Reach out for support, take breaks, and do what you need to stay balanced.

by Md. Fazle Hasan SHISHIR (Info.ratherhoodinitiatives@gmail.com) is a Bangladeshi producer-director-curator. His filmography spans a period of twelve years in various fields of practical filmmaking. His producing credits include films like *Mukuler Jadur Ghora* (2021), *Café Desire* (2023) and *An Imaginary Interview* (2023). Shishir nurtures a collective of young Bangladeshi filmmakers, and is also interested in a curatorial model of cinematic productions. *Beyond the Trails* (2023) is his directorial debut which is reaching out for its festival premiere. *Suraiya*, his project in development, was selected for the Asian Project Market 2023 and the Produire Au Sud Dharamshala (FilmLab South Asia 2023).

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals







ISABELLE GLACHANT

Producer /

Founder of Chinese Shadows, Asian Shadows and Shasha & Co
China



Interview by WU Hongwei



Isabelle Glachant initially worked as a journalist at TV station Canal+ and an audiovisual attaché for the French Embassy in China before joining the production of Wang Xiaoshuai's Shanghai Dreams as an executive producer. Since then she has continued to work with Wang Xiaoshuai as well as many other directors in and outside of China. She is the founder of Hong-Kong based production company Chinese Shadows and French-based Shasha & Co Production, which includes among its credits Wang Bing's Three Sisters (Venice Orizzonti Best Film Award, 2012), Wang Xiaoshuai's Chinese Portrait (Busan IFF 2018) and Mouly Surya's Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts (Cannes Directors' Fortnight, 2017). Glachant also founded international sales company Asian Shadows, which represents many films from across the Asian region. Named a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture, Glachant also works as Greater China representative for UNIFRANCE.

Wu Hongwei

Could you please introduce yourself?

Isabelle Glachant

My name is Isabelle Glachant, but I also have a second name or a second identity, which is my Chinese name: 伊莎. I would present myself as a producer. That's what matters the most to me.

Wu Hongwei

You have a production company based in Beijing, China, and also a production company based in Paris, another sales company based in Hong Kong. I'm curious why you structure the companies in this way, and how you choose the base for each company.

Isabelle Glachant

I don't have a company in mainland China; we are based in China but registered in Hong Kong. We operate two companies in Hong Kong: one for sales which is named Asian Shadows, and another for production services and consulting, known as Chinese Shadows. Additionally, I've established a French company called Shasha & Co Production. This French entity allows us to access French support for arthouse projects and operate within a different system. However, our physical presence in China, working closely with Asian filmmakers, motivated us to primarily focus on supporting Asian cinema and facilitating Asian films' international reach.

The journey began with the Hong Kong-based company Chinese Shadows, dedicated to production and services. As our work with Asian films evolved, we realized the need for French support, especially concerning funds like cinémas du monde that are well-known among French producers when collaborating with Asian directors. The decision to involve a French producer isn't solely about accessing such funds, as I am French and could apply for them myself. Rather, it is about them bringing something unique to the project, like an artistic perspective.

Wu Hongwei

Is it best to set up the company in Hong Kong if you want to work in China?

Isabelle Glachant

I believe setting up the company in Hong Kong was the best choice for me, given my circumstances. I'm not Chinese, and I can't read or write Chinese. In Hong Kong, English is the primary language, and the legal system closely follows the British model. This allowed me to have a clear understanding of the documents I was signing, which is crucial in the film industry where contracts are abundant. While I, being French, prioritize the director's centrality and the author's role in filmmaking over copyright, contract adjustments are still necessary. I considered Hong Kong as the ideal location because it's a place that's almost like China but doesn't operate entirely under the Chinese system. In China, where everything is in Chinese, I would have struggled with legal matters and document comprehension, potentially signing blindly.

I don't believe there are fixed rules for the best location to set up a company. It's highly dependent on individual circumstances and needs. I've spent considerable time both in China and in France, and there are numerous producers in France. I didn't want to become just another French producer. I wanted to be part of the Chinese industry when I started so I wanted to be Asian. So that's why I decided that Hong Kong was the right place.

Wu Hongwei

What is your biggest contribution to the films you work on as a French producer? And as Isabelle Glachant?

Isabelle Glachant

I do know now, but I didn't know when I started—you grow and evolve. The more you learn, the more you can contribute. I now consider myself what Europeans refer to as a 'creative producer.' For me, it's not primarily about money or contracts, though strategy plays a part. What I bring most to a project is a unique perspective on the film the director is about to create. This involves extensive discussions about script development. While I'm less involved during the actual shooting, I find post-production, especially editing, to be crucial. It's a time to open new creative doors and make the film better. And then it's a certain strategy which goes with perspective, having more distance with the film.

For example, I recently met with a filmmaker, and we worked on a short film together. The short had two parts, but to me, it felt like two separate shorts. This sparked a valuable discussion because, as an audience member, I could see that there was an echo between the two parts, albeit just an echo. The filmmaker was initially hesitant, citing that it wasn't his area to manage this aspect. That's where the producer comes in—considering how to present the film to the audience, festivals, and the market once the director has created the film. A producer should have a strategy—should it be one film with two parts, or are these two distinct films? Should they be introduced together at a festival, or separately at different festivals? There are pros and cons, and the ultimate goal is what's best for the film and the director. It's not always about selling the film to a platform for a large sum, but often about using it as a calling card for the filmmaker's future projects. This strategy is a key part of a producer's role and can't always be expected from directors, who are more focused on their craft.

When I first started, I became a producer because Wang Xiaoshuai asked me to produce for him. This was because I could speak Chinese, English and French, because I knew some things about the international market and he was tired of handling everything by himself. So I think that for him at that time I was learning a bad way, that I was a super assistant. But he gave me a chance to make decisions, I could check out possibilities and he gave me that position that helped me understand what I was good at and what he was lacking, which is what filmmakers actually do need to make films.

Wu Hongwei

How do you choose the projects you produce and do sales for? How do you find those projects?

Isabelle Glachant

At first I would only produce films that filmmakers brought to me. I didn't actively seek out directors, not because I didn't dare to, but because I think between a producer and the director you need to have a close relationship, and they need to trust you.

Trust is the foundation that allows you to engage in meaningful discussions, even disagreements. It's about having a voice in the creative process. Unfortunately, in Asia, there's a common perception that producers are banks, and it's all about securing finance without active involvement in the filmmaking process. I don't see myself as such a producer, and I'm not interested in being one.

Therefore, the first films I worked on were the ones where filmmakers approached me, seeking my help—literally '帮忙' (help) in Chinese, meaning they trust you and consider you a friend, signaling that we had established a relationship. I was genuinely happy to assist them and collaborate on their projects.

Isabelle Glachant

As time passed, I gained confidence in my abilities as a producer and started to connect with projects on a deeper level. It's about falling in love with a project and its director and the work that they have done before. It's about the director's creative world and how the specific project resonates with me. You'll spend four or five years on a project, so you need to genuinely care about it. If you're not convinced by the project, you shouldn't get involved. I believe in projects where I feel I can make a difference, where I'm the right fit.

Let me provide an example: I once had a Chinese director approach me, an established figure who expressed a desire to work with me. However, the project he presented, from my perspective, came across as somewhat sexist, with a main female character that I found regressive. I couldn't relate to the character's motivations and actions, and I was genuinely offended. Even though I respected the director and his previous work, I realized that I would clash with him throughout the project, potentially undermining his vision. So, I decided that I wasn't the right producer for this particular project. I advised him to proceed without my involvement, as my input would only hinder his film. It's a matter of being the right person for the right project while respecting the director's vision and talent.

Furthermore, choosing a project is also about choosing other producers who may have different priorities and approaches. Sometimes you might not have a fondness for everyone involved in a project, but you decide to proceed because you believe in the project and you care about the director. It's essential to navigate such situations based on your experiences and understanding of your own values. From my experience, I do think that it's better not to join such a project. Because the other producers will also be your partners, not just the director. It's not about two people falling in love, but about an entire family, including people you hate. It's going to be tough to spend all that time with that family. And at one point, you will tell the person you love how ugly the family is, but he loves his family, maybe. So maybe wait for the next one, or when he is not close to his family any more.

As for Asian Shadows, it's a bit more complex. I founded the company, but I'm not directly involved in sales and festival management; we have a dedicated team for that. Asian Shadows was conceived as a boutique sales company with a unique concept. Our selection criteria differ from many sales companies. We choose films because we genuinely love them and want to stand by the director's side in presenting their work to the world. Even when we know a film might not be highly profitable, it's essential for us to support emerging directors and significant films. Our ultimate goal is to defend and promote Asian cinema which lacks support both in funding and main film festival recognition, compared to the US and Europe.

Asian cinema is unique in its philosophy, cultural values, and the way it explores themes like family, relationships, death, and religion. It has a special voice that resonates for the Asian audience and filmmakers, but on a global scale, its presence in festivals and markets is relatively small. Unlike Europe, where strong support exists for both production and festivals, Asia struggles with limited funding for development and production. The unique Asian perspective deserves to be shared worldwide, which is why we, as a European-Asian team based in Asia and Europe, came together to create Asian Shadows. We believe we can do something that other companies may not be able to, and this vision lies at the core of our company's founding.

Wu Hongwei

As you just mentioned, money is not the first thing you care about. But how do you make sure that at least the company breaks even? Because at the end of the day, you still want to run a business.

Isabelle Glachant

I think we're in a business where, to be honest, we have no clue in advance whether the film is going to work or not, to make money or lose money. When deciding to take on a film, you're often in the dark about its future. Many Asian producers approach us with a specific goal: to sell their films to Netflix. However, our company has a different approach. We are committed to not selling to Netflix, because we recognize that such a move can hinder a film's journey to festivals and achieving recognition. This approach might make sense for commercial films with no festival aspirations, but those are not the kinds of films we handle.

Especially when working with first or second-time directors, the primary objective for producers isn't solely financial gain. If making money is the primary goal, there are safer investments available, like real estate. For me, cinema is art, and I am French again, very romantic on what culture, the arts and cinema means. I will not be able to live without cinema. This is my religion. When you believe so much in talent and in stories and in moving the audience, sometimes you take a film because you believe in the film, but you don't know if it's going to make money. Even if a film is considered "unmarketable" or too experimental, we see the value in defending, promoting, and presenting it. We often invest in these "tough" films, hoping to provide a platform for talented filmmakers to create their next projects.

Many sales companies primarily focus on selling films, and when a film doesn't sell, they might struggle to determine its fate. But for us, we can still bring the film to festivals and then retrospectives when the filmmaker has done another film. The key is to find alternative paths for these films to continue existing.

The lifespan of arthouse Asian films is often limited, as they have a brief moment in the spotlight during their festival runs. The challenge is to ensure that these films continue to exist beyond this initial period. Platforms like Mubi have helped in showcasing such films, but it's essential to bridge the gap between availability and audience awareness. The platform is like a mirage. You might have the impression that the films are available, but the audience doesn't know that your film is available there. So actually, it's like a black hole.

We strongly believe that the best way for these films to reach their audience is through theatrical distribution whenever possible. Television offers another way to bring these films into people's homes. But what is very important is when the filmmaker does another film, we aim to have their previous films travel again, potentially through festival screenings, special events, or retrospectives.

Wu Hongwei

You have produced many documentaries and narrative films, in recent years some animation, could you please tell us about how you choose these types of films? Do you have a preference for each type?

Isabelle Glachant

First and foremost, I would say that documentaries are a form of cinema. It's very

Isabelle Glachant

important to include documentaries as cinema. It's something that you see on the big screen. Even though some documentaries are made for television. Asian documentaries, in particular, often have a distinct style of storytelling and character representation that can be less direct and less immediate, making them less recognized globally. This is something I find regrettable because I have a deep appreciation for documentaries.

My own journey into the world of cinema began when I worked for a French TV channel, Canal+, where I created reports and conducted interviews. And I started doing editing by myself. So I was hoping at that time to become an editor, or if I was to become a director, I would have done documentaries. Because for me, one big complicated thing is the actors, and I'm not really sure how they work. It seems too complicated. So I was thinking maybe reality is easy, but I discovered the complexity of taking your camera out and filming real people, because your camera then has an effect. So I really admire documentary filmmakers in what they manage to catch, because I know how difficult it is.

But it's not that I want to do documentaries. When you have a documentary filmmaker that comes to you and asks you to work with him, and he's a great filmmaker, it's very difficult to say, "No, I'm not going to work with you because you don't do narrative." But I'm not searching for documentaries, because I think documentary is even more tricky than fiction. There's no cast. It depends on the material you film, the topic, the talent to make it into cinema. But I have the same emotion – I cry in front of a documentary like I cry in front of a fiction film, so I think there's no limit.

Regarding animation, I had never worked on an animation project until I met Leilei. However, Leilei is a unique director who combines real elements, such as photos and real past histories. And then he had his crazy imagination of using clay colors and everything on it to talk about what happened in the past in a fictional manner. When we pitched Leilei's projects, we found it challenging to categorize them simply as documentaries, animation, or fiction. So the answer was, it is cinema. We're making cinema. While animation is distinct in its approach—lacking live shooting and cast—it involves a different level of work, particularly in sound design. As Godard once said, cinema is a combination of sound and image. Sometimes, sound has a more significant impact on us than images.

As a producer, when I fall in love with a project and believe that I can contribute to it, I find it immensely rewarding. For directors like Leilei, who had never worked with a producer before, it took him some time to understand the producer's role. It's not about control or limitations; it's about expanding horizons. A friend of mine once shared an analogy: the director is like someone in a garden, selecting flowers to create a bouquet, while the producer stands outside the garden, pointing out other possibilities and colors, making sure the director doesn't miss interesting opportunities. I find this analogy quite compelling and believe in the value of a producer's guidance. I don't claim to have all the answers, but I'm full of questions and possibilities, ready to open doors and windows. However, the director is the one in the garden, picking the flowers, and it's crucial to have someone with a different perspective protecting their back.

Wu Hongwei

Everyone knows that China has one of the most restrictive censorship systems, but many people don't know exactly how it works. Could you share with us your insights regarding censorship in China, and also the level of censorship faced by documentary narrative films and animation?

Isabelle Glachant

Many of the films I've mentioned weren't produced within the Chinese system, and they didn't need to navigate China's censorship regulations. Censorship has existed worldwide, including France, where Godard's films faced restrictions and couldn't be released. The United States also had significant censorship for a long time, with peculiar rules like married couples in their 30s have to sleep in separate beds or keep their feet on the floor when sitting. So, censorship is a global phenomenon, and it's not unique to China. Every country has its own set of rules, but China is one of the countries that still has one. When you work within a specific system, you must adapt to it. There's no escaping censorship.

Whether a film passes censorship depends on the prevailing circumstances at the time of the film's presentation. Filmmakers must decide whether they want to operate within the system, releasing their film in China, obtaining financing from China, or take their story and shoot in another location, like Thailand. In the rest of the world, films typically undergo classification, and you must decide what implications that classification has for your film. For example, if your film is classified as adult content, it won't be shown in regular cinemas. The specifics of censorship may vary, but it's essential to consider why you want to shoot a film in China.

If you're addressing topics like LGBTQ issues that you know are problematic in China, it's worth questioning why you're choosing mainland China as the location. Taiwan, for example, is more accepting of LGBTQ topics. So, the decision on where to shoot your film should align with the story you want to tell and the message you aim to convey.

When it comes to the topic of Chinese censorship, it's essential to understand that censorship isn't limited to cinema; it's a broader issue affecting the entire country. However, you don't necessarily have to be physically in China to be influenced by censorship. While artists should have the freedom to express themselves anywhere in the world, cinema is a costly industry. It's not like a writer with a pencil and paper, or a painter in front of a canvas. There are financial considerations that impact your creative freedom. Whether you're in China or outside, making a film, like a French film, comes with its own set of rules and limitations, although they may differ from censorship issues.

In many parts of Asia, it's challenging for directors to create films. In Japan, for example, funding often comes from private sources, and private money is tied to the cast. Independent films in Japan typically have very small budgets, and this limitation can make the films appear small in scale. While these directors may not face censorship, they deal with other constraints that restrict their creative vision and the stories they can tell. There's no perfect or fair world in the realm of filmmaking.

In the context of censorship, it's crucial to recognize that creative individuals have historically found ways to convey their intended messages even under strict censorship. For instance, they might employ symbolism and metaphor, as seen in Hitchcock's film, the classic example of a train entering a tunnel to symbolize a sex scene. Despite the need to adhere to certain rules, filmmakers can still be creative and clever in conveying their intended messages.

Wu Hongwei

In a previous interview you briefly talked about being a script consultant on Lu Chuan's City of Life and Death to make the plot more accessible to Western audiences. Could you

Wu Hongwei

share with us some other examples of your suggestions on scripts regarding cultural elements? And what are the difficult things for the East and West to understand about each other?

Isabelle Glachant

For *City of Life and Death*, my consultation wasn't related to the script but focused on the editing. The film tackled a straightforward issue, the Nanking Massacre in China. In China, the entire population, regardless of age, is already familiar with this historical event. You don't need to show much; just a scene of a little girl shouting with Japanese soldiers approaching, and simply displaying "Nanking" and the date on the screen is enough to evoke strong emotions in Chinese audiences. They know what happened and what's to come. However, for a French audience, the Nanking Massacre might be unfamiliar, and even the word "massacre" could require clarification. You must visually convey the story for them to comprehend.

The challenge lies in finding the right balance between showing enough for Western audiences to grasp the gravity of the situation and not overburdening Chinese viewers who are already deeply affected by the historical context. The editing process was complex due to these considerations.

Another typical example is that in Asia, people are very attached to cities in the south, in the north, in the east because of local history. So very often the script in Chinese will have the name of the little town, and then it says in that area, in that province... it's a list of four names. But South China doesn't mean anything for Europeans. For us in France, the south might mean people talk more, and it is more exuberant because it's hotter. So that's another example. Some additional context can help make the story more accessible. In script discussions, it's never to erase the specificity needed for the local audience. It's to have another layer – sometimes in the dialogue, sometimes just a few words – to be sure that people who are not from that country can still understand what it is about.

Asian films often play with words and nuances, making them rich in cultural references. Chinese artists are very used to playing with words. I remember in [Wang Xiaoshuai's] *11 Flowers*, one day the father says something like, the winter is coming, or there's going to be rain. I was doing the translation and asked why they talked about the rain. I was told it was because politically, something bad was coming. So in the translation process, it's vital not to oversimplify, but rather to add a layer that ensures non-native audiences still understand the essence of the story. It's about maintaining a balance between local authenticity and universal accessibility.

For Asian films to reach international audiences, they need to retain their cultural roots and uniqueness. Hollywood films tend to be simplified to ensure wide appeal, but arthouse and Asian films that travel, actually need to be local films. So it's very important that they stay connected to their local culture, but still be universal. Take the example of *Parasite*, a Korean film that won global acclaim. International audiences loved it because it was Korean. There's part of it that they don't understand, that they've never seen before that's so local. But a poor family versus a rich family, and deceiving each other, killing each other... We don't need to be Korean to understand it.

Isabelle Glachant

In the end, even when watching foreign films, audiences might not understand every detail, but they can still enjoy and appreciate what they comprehend. It's about finding that balance between specificity and universality in storytelling.

Wu Hongwei

In another previous interview, you mentioned that you think, "Deep in every director's heart, every director wants to tell stories of their own land and their people, so friends, neighbors and family can understand what the story is about." But as a filmmaker myself who has watched a lot of films at festivals, especially in these years, what I observe is, a lot of Chinese films which get into big festivals nowadays are not really liked by Chinese - the ratings are very low on Douban (Chinese IMDB). What are your thoughts on this?

Isabelle Glachant

China has a unique context with its massive population of 1.4 billion people. In France and Europe, arthouse films typically cater to a niche audience, with occasional instances of films gaining wide popularity. However, in China, expectations for box office success might be unrealistically high, and arthouse cinema can have a negative connotation. The term "文艺片" (wenyipian) is often associated with talkative, low-budget, and somewhat dull films in the eyes of many Chinese viewers. Consequently, some filmmakers in China try to avoid the arthouse label.

An example is the release of Bi Gan's film *Long Day's Journey Into Night* ["Last Evenings On Earth"] on New Year's Eve, which initially drew large audiences due to a misleading promotion targeting couples - you should spend the last night of the year with the one you love watching this film. And because of Tang Wei, so many fans went to see the film and expected a commercial film. But they were so pissed. This film had substantial box office on the first day, but saw a dramatic drop the next day. It was a film that lasted one day. I'm not sure it's smart. Such tactics may backfire, as they can erode the trust of the audience who feel like they were misled.

The Chinese market, with so many screens, has cinemas that take down your films in one day if you don't do good box office. There is no chance for arthouse cinema and niche films to build word of mouth, being released for three months and slowly having people go to see them. So films that have gone to festivals, even Jia Zhangke's films, were not huge box office. They have never been in the top 10. Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai are the same, and I think recently Wei Shujun's films didn't work that well. Anthony Chen's film didn't do well. Those films are not commercial films for the majority of Chinese filmgoers. So they might have lower commercial potential. But in Europe or in other markets, they have a little more space. And it's possible to say, this is an arthouse film in a good sense made for people who love more intellectual, more artistic films, and they still have the time to see it. In France, these films have one week when the cinema cannot take them down. Maybe two weeks, depending on the deal made by the distributor, but the audience at least has several days. But when you have one day in China, you don't even know that the film is out and it is already not playing anymore. This is the first reason.

The second reason is that on social media, which is the case worldwide, it's easier to attack than to support. Negative voices tend to be louder and more eager to express their opinions. Filmmakers can face swift and harsh judgment from online users. In contrast, those who love a film might not rush to share their praise.

Isabelle Glachant

In France, every French citizen is a film critic, all of us have an idea of what is film. It's not because someone says a film is horrible that I will not love it, because actually maybe that person had very bad taste for me. So actually to balance that, usually you have film critics. People that you trust, that have a name, that write reviews which are intelligent, articulate, that put the film in perspective and even raise questions - the film went to Cannes and people liked it, but what do they like? What do they see in the film that we actually don't see in the film? It's important that they explain, not just saying it's bad, but to explain why it's bad. And I have the feeling for China, you don't have that many very strong film critics. So you don't have someone with knowledge that can balance the fact that some people hate it.

In France, we actually have the opposite. When Jean-Jacques Annaud and Luc Besson's films, which are commercial films, are released, the press and the reviews are usually very bad. Yet the public go to see them and they like them and the box office is good. So the audience would complain because they don't understand why the critics always attack them when the audiences always like their films. In China, the filmmakers who travel internationally are trashed by nobodies online.

Recently I went to see the Chinese film *Advancing of ZQ*, a comedy directed by Sheng Teng. It was released this summer, and everyone said it was so bad. The rating was very bad on Douban. After watching all those serious films from China, I saw this was a comedy, so I went to watch it with a friend of mine who works with me, Maria. So we are two Chinese speakers who have been in China for a long time. There were two other Chinese people in the cinema. We loved the entire film so much. It was a small comedy, I mean it was not a Cannes winning Palme d'Or film, but another type. I saw things that were very political, very social and a different perspective on Chinese families. And it was open minded, because for example in the family, they have a kid who is not a Chinese kid, she's a white kid. But she was abandoned and the family found her on the street, and she's a little sister in the family that just adopted her, which I think is great. In a Chinese family, even if you're white and you're not from the family, you're still part of the family. And they will protect you. I love that idea of being generous and opening the door to abandoned kids, orphans. But it's so funny that all the Chinese people I talked to commented on the film, and said the film was so bad because the reviews were so bad on Douban and social media, though none of them had actually seen it. And nobody wants to see the film because they already think the film is bad. I guess what people expected from Sheng Teng was another type of film, so maybe they're disappointed by this one. But the political side that I see, regarding the war in Ukraine, and it takes place in eastern Europe, I see Putin and I see references in the film that make me laugh so much.

Wu Hongwei

Did you ever think about doing film criticism yourself?

Isabelle Glachant

No. Because I think when you're a film critic, when you produce, your brain works in different ways. When I see a film, I see a problem in the script, I see what they should have done in the editing. And a film critic, I think, never sees what you would have changed, but tries to understand why it is this way. So it's very different.

I would give an example of Liang Ying, a producer in China who worked with me before.

Isabelle Glachant

She used to be a film critic, and when she started working with me, when she was reading the script, it was very interesting. I was saying, this doesn't work, and every time she said yeah, but maybe the director wants to say... But for me, I don't care what the director wanted to do, because it's not coming out, it's not working. So I wanted to change things, when she was justifying and trying to understand why it was this way. And I was saying no, you haven't stopped being a film critic, get to the production side with me and see that this is not working. So whatever the reason, the director has to work on it because it's not working. I wouldn't be able to be a film critic.

Wu Hongwei

For the last question, I want to let you create a question yourself that I didn't ask.

Isabelle Glachant

It wouldn't be a question, but it's something that I would say is very important. As a producer, to find people that you look up to. And for me, there are producers, more experienced than me, that I'm very thankful I could spend time with, and talk with them about their films, about my films. I'm thinking about Shi Nansun, to share with her some things. It's inspiring. Because it's people from the upper generation that are more experienced. It helps a lot to have other people. I'm thinking of Carole Scotta from the company Haut et Court in France. It's when you see what they are capable of doing, that you've never done yourself. It gives you space to say, maybe I can try it. I think it's important for us to have them share with us, and to share with others. We're not alone. Not in a competitive way, which is sometimes the case... "You took my director; you took my project." It's important to find some other producers who you can go to, and explain to them your issues, people who are more experienced that have passed these stages.

by Wu Hongwei (hongweiw5@gmail.com) is an MFA candidate of the film producing program at Columbia University. She is the producer of *Fishtank*, which was awarded the grand prize at 2023 Tribeca Through Her Lens. She has worked on over 50 short films all around China and the US, including *One for Sorrow*, *Two for Joy* which won the Short Film Jury Prize at the Austin Film Festival and was qualified for the Oscars.

She is a curious explorer. Through her travels, she has seen how lands have determined history and shaped humans. She is passionate about making films that explore all these dimensions – of space, time and human endeavours.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals






ADEL TABRIZI

Screenwriter / Director

Iran

Interview by Armin RAHIMINEZHAD



Adel Tabrizi is a distinguished Iranian writer and director who initiated his illustrious cinematic journey through the creation of short films. With a portfolio of six short films and an extensive background as an assistant director, collaborating with prominent figures in Iranian cinema, Tabrizi seamlessly transitioned to directing feature films. In 2019, he unveiled his debut feature *Punch Drunk* (original title 'Gijgah') as co-writer and director. The film made its premiere at the prestigious 39th International Fajr Film Festival, earning nominations for the Crystal Simorgh Award in two categories, notably the Best Director Award for Debut Film.

Building on this success, Tabrizi expanded his creative horizons into television, crafting his inaugural TV series, *Jenabe-Aali*, and helming a TV film. Currently, his feature film *Punch Drunk* continues its run on the festival circuit, garnering acclaim at various festivals worldwide. Additionally, the film, featuring a cast of Iranian stars, has received a theatrical release and has garnered a substantial audience.

Armin
Rahiminezhad

To begin, please introduce yourself and tell us in which year you started your involvement in cinema.

Adel Tabrizi

My name is Adel Tabrizi, born in 1983, in the city of Mashhad. I entered the Iranian Youth Cinema Society at the age of 16. At 18, I earned a diploma in cinema from an art school in Mashhad, and thereafter I enrolled in Soore University in the field of cinema for my undergraduate studies. Regarding my practical experience in filmmaking, I directed my first short film in the year 1998. My professional entry into the world of Iranian cinema, marked by having my name in the credits, occurred with the film *Verdict* (2005) directed by Masoud Kimiai.

Subsequently, I pursued assistant directing as a career, having the opportunity to collaborate with prominent directors such as Masoud Kimiai, Rasool Sadr-Ameli, Dariush Mehrjui, Hamid Nematollah, Hatef Alimardani, Reza Dormishian, Navid Danesh, Alireza Amini, Bahram Tavakoli, and others. Simultaneously, I continued making short films, aiming to establish myself as a director. This journey led to the creation of my first feature film titled *Punch Drunk* in recent years, followed by a series named *Jenab-e Aali*.

Armin
Rahiminezhad

Considering the background information you provided, in your opinion, how much impact do academic qualifications and the creation of short films have on one's path to becoming a filmmaker and achieving success in this field?

Adel Tabrizi

The only positive impact of academic studies in cinema is creating a setting where one finds motivation to work. It's like being in a forum where the interaction with fellow students and professors becomes a self-motivating environment for personal growth. I believe that if I hadn't entered university, much of my energy and interest might have dissipated. The university amplified those interests and motivations within me. I didn't go to university to learn something specific because there is a common objection that people don't learn anything useful during their academic studies, or if they do, it tends to be more theoretical than practical in the realm of cinema. I mostly remember the enthusiasm and joy of my university days, how enjoyable it was, and how it intensified my passion for cinema.

Armin
Rahiminezhad

Regarding your career path, some people perceive Adel Tabrizi as a filmmaker in the realm of comedy, but more in the domain of serious comedy.

Adel Tabrizi

You can find layers of humor in my works, but not conventional comedy as typically defined in Iranian cinema.

Armin
Rahiminezhad

Yes, I wanted to ask about this. Because based on my understanding of you and your artistic path, I know that you have a concern for societal issues. Or at least, it can be said that your films have no resemblance to the comedies that are commonly considered part of mainstream, commercial cinema in today's Iranian cinema. I want to know how and why you arrived at this point. Because from your short films, this trend was already evident up until your feature films and series.

Adel Tabrizi

Actually, short films led me to discover my personal interest. I have never really thought that my films should be successful at festivals. I was more focused on creating a film that

Adel Tabrizi

resembles myself, that aligns with my tastes. I wasn't the type to follow festivals, observe current trends, and think that I must definitely make a successful film based on those things. I was more concerned with how to create a film that comes from within me and reflects my own model, not only in the screenplay but also in the structure and blocking.

Additionally, in terms of form and content, the film should relate to the identity of Adel Tabrizi's life. I don't sell my ideas and things that come from social conditions through my films. By "I don't sell," I mean I don't present them. I present my inner self, my weaknesses, joys, and sorrows to the people.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

Could you please explain the systematic process of filmmaking in our cinema for filmmakers who are about to create their first or second film, as you are currently in this stage?

Adel Tabrizi

It's extremely challenging, an intensely difficult journey. Each stage is harder than the previous one for someone determined to make a cinematic film in Iran. Maybe it's easy for some, but I can speak from my own experience – it has been very challenging for me. The difficulty persists, as finding funds has been hard, pushing the film forward has been hard, and producing it has been hard.

Continuing forward, you also have to see what happens to the film in distribution. Whether the producer is among the influential figures in the Iranian cinema distribution list or not is crucial [to ensure the best screening conditions]. The path is incredibly challenging, full of fog. You take steps, striving to reach the light. As you approach, the light becomes visible, and you take another step, but it seems the farther you go, the denser the fog becomes.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

Following up on that, can I ask how film funding works in our cinema, and are there specific conditions? How do producers assist in this process?

Adel Tabrizi

A filmmaker must find the funding for their film project on their own. It's not like producers invest and provide the money. The filmmaker has to source capital from various non-cinematic professions and find sponsors. Perhaps it happens for some filmmakers, but it didn't happen easily for me. I spent several years trying to secure the funds for making this film. Attracting actors for participation in a project is another challenge. With the abundance of productions in Iranian cinema, including OTT series, having the necessary funds alone doesn't guarantee attracting actors. In total, various stages in the process present their own challenges, as we discussed, including the screening conditions.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

Is there is a specific structure and regulations for someone like you, who has successfully made his first film, received acclaim in theaters and festivals, and has also produced a series, to easily secure funding for his next film?

Adel Tabrizi

No really, it seems that you are at the same point again, and you have to go through the same challenging path to manage the finances and capital for film production.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

Okay, let me ask a general question about Iranian cinema. Our cinema was once known

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

for its social themes. Globally, it was famous for its real-life narratives, realistic dramas, and social concerns. Now, our cinema has shifted towards producing more comedies, which are being screened, and the space for such films to be seen has expanded. Can you offer an overview of the current state of Iranian cinema from your perspective as a director who is not directly involved in this trend?

Adel Tabrizi

Actually, Iranian cinema has been in a declining phase for about 15 years now. The previous years were a period of prosperity, spanning from 1961 until the beginning of the 2000s, during which we witnessed a diversity of genres. At its best, in some years, there were excellent films in all genres simultaneously.

Iranian cinema lost its diversity at some point, and films became uniform and similar. Imagination and creative power in Iranian cinema have decreased. Social realism films replaced all other genres. The dominance of social realism has resulted in people not finding anything imaginative in cinema, leading to a decline in the audience's connection with cinema. Throughout the history of Iranian cinema, various genres have been in vogue in different periods. Action films were a trend in one period, children's films in another, and now, comedy films are trending in these days. But, in general, for the past 15 years, Iranian cinema has not been in good shape.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

Can you tell me your opinion on the role of foreign festivals for Iranian cinema? Can it impact local distribution and visibility?

Adel Tabrizi

It doesn't have any impact on screenings, no matter how successful a film is internationally. However, the film *Punch Drunk* has been relatively successful in international distribution, both in terms of the number of festivals it has been invited to, and the awards it has received relative to its presence. But I don't think its participation in festivals and awards creates any appeal for the audience. It might create interest among other filmmakers, critics, media professionals, and artists who may go see the film to understand why it was successful, but not for the general audience.

For a filmmaker, success in a festival might make things harder for them. They might think, "Now, after this, what kind of film should I make to match or exceed this success?" It's better not to achieve such successes, and the shadow of a festival trophy does not fall on you to make it easier to create films. You know, when this happens, you become concerned about your future films. But when you make films more freely, in my opinion, you make better films than being a successful person at festivals and always worrying about the future.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad
Adel Tabrizi**

Have you considered the international distribution and sales of your film?

The reality is that the producers and distributors working with them should follow up on this matter. I have provided my recommendations. My film is well-suited for screening in many countries; for example, it has become very popular in Italy. I have received very positive feedback from Italian audiences, thanks to its presence in festivals and the awards it has received there. The film has won awards in Russia, and it has been screened in other countries such as the United States, Argentina, Poland, India, and more, receiving very positive feedback from audiences. In my opinion, the film is one that connects with

Adel Tabrizi

different cultures.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

You pointed out an interesting point. Now that different cultures have been able to connect with your film, have you considered co-productions with other countries for your future projects?

Adel Tabrizi

I am very eager to do so. Currently, *Punch Drunk* seems to be a film perfectly suited for co-production in my opinion. Why? Because in this film, Japanese culture is intertwined with Iranian culture. For instance, the main character's book combines Ferdowsi's Shahnameh book with Karate techniques, exploring the philosophies of Sōsai Oyama with the thoughts of Ferdowsi. *Punch Drunk* is entirely related to the cultures of both countries. Therefore, in this very film, you can see my interest in collaborative work between countries and different cultures. One of the appealing factors of *Punch Drunk* is the character who wears a Japanese headband, but holds the Shahnameh book by Ferdowsi in his hands.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

It's fascinating how this collision of cultures attracts you.

Adel Tabrizi

Indeed, the encounter of cultures creates a sweetness. When you travel abroad, you might not understand their language, but their language sounds sweet to you, and you also appreciate discovering each other's sweetness.

**Armin
Rahiminezhad**

And as the last question, in your opinion, where is our cinema heading, and how do you see its future?

Adel Tabrizi

Well, just as film production in Iran is full of challenges, and you don't know what's happening, the path to its future is also full of fog, and everything is interconnected, making it unpredictable. Regardless, I am hopeful and still optimistic that positive developments await our cinema.

by

Armin Rahiminezhad (armin.rahiminezhad@gmail.com) is a rising producer and director in Iran, who embarked on his professional journey through a long-term filmmaking course at the Iranian Youth Cinema Society while pursuing a degree in Industrial Engineering. For graduate studies, he ventured into the realm of the arts. Choosing dramatic literature for his masters degree, he graduated as the top student from Iran's premier cinema university, propelling him into the professional film industry. Alongside teaching, writing acclaimed works and producing multiple films for aspiring young filmmakers, he has dedicated himself to creating short films. Recently, he founded his own company with the mission of supporting independent filmmakers, striving to create an environment conducive to the emergence and growth of Iranian independent works.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals








KIM HONG-JOON

Director of Korean Film Archive
South Korea

Interview by OH Sodam (translated from Korean)



Kim Hong-Joon is a South Korean filmmaker, director, and professor. He is currently serving as the Director of the Korean Film Archive (KOFA). He graduated from Seoul National University with a degree in Anthropology and was a core member of the first university film club in Korea called "Yallashyong." After completing his Ph.D. in Anthropology at Temple University, he joined director Im Kwon-taek's film *Fly High Run Far-Kae Byok* as an assistant to the director, and began his career in the Korean film industry. He made his feature film debut with *A Rosy Life* in 1994.

Oh Sodam

Hello Director Kim Hong-Joon, I'm Oh Sodam, a fellow at the Busan Asian Film School. Previously, I had the opportunity to meet you when I was working at the Korean Cultural Centre UK. At that time, we met regarding the screening of A Rosy Life, so I'm familiar with addressing you as "Director Kim Hong-Joon." But I know you have worked in various roles. Could you please introduce the work you have done so far?

KIM Hong-Joon

In terms of identity, I started as a film director, then also worked as a film studies professor. I don't consider myself a critic or researcher, but I have written books about film. I have also been a film festival programmer and executive director, as well as artistic director, a position I created which mixes the roles of executive director and programmer. I have experience in organizing film festivals, and briefly served as a member of the Korean Film Council. I have also been a jury member for various film festivals. Perhaps my relationship with film festivals is the most diverse.

Currently, I am the Director of the Korean Film Archive. Looking at all these roles, it seems like I have done a wide range of work, but personally, I see them all as part of the same job related to film. Even though I have been a film director, being a film director and making films was not the most important thing in my life. So, I have never really thought, "I have to be a film director." Furthermore, I approached my role as a professor at a film school by teaching students and engaging with them in thinking and experiencing films together. The title or social status of being a professor did not hold much significance in that regard. Of course, it doesn't mean that it was completely insignificant, but it wasn't the most important aspect.

Oh Sodam

Still, it appears that you were quite popular as a professor.

KIM Hong-Joon

That's not so important. It depends on how students perceive you. Also, it isn't necessarily always a good thing to be popular as a professor. What's important is teaching well. So, teaching well is more important than being popular. Anyway, when I look at it all together, I think I received more recognition than my abilities deserved, considering that all I did was work related to film. So, I think I was very fortunate compared to many others who couldn't do what they loved while making a living, supporting their families, and being able to make social statements through their work. So, I shouldn't complain. All these things are included in my identity as a filmmaker. I didn't think much about what I should give up, or what I should pursue.

Oh Sodam

Actually, you studied anthropology as your major. Was there a specific thing that led you to filmmaking?

KIM Hong-Joon

There wasn't any special reason. I have never really planned my life or set goals. Of course, there are things to do from time to time. When I take on a certain position, such as being an artistic director for a film festival, I think, "I should do my best for this year's film festival." But in terms of my life's goals, I have never actively pursued them or made plans. So, I'm a passive person in that sense. That's why there wasn't a particular reason to start filmmaking, but as I lived my life, I was naturally led to this point.

Actually, filmmaking used to be a hobby for me. I had a different major, and I even went abroad to study cultural anthropology. But during the process of preparing my Ph.D.

KIM Hong-Joon dissertation, my mindset started to change. I realized that I wasn't the scholarly type. I felt a barrier in pursuing that kind of path. So I changed direction. I was wondering what would be left if I removed cultural anthropology from my life, and it turns out that films were what was left. So now, what used to be a hobby has become my profession. But anyway, even if I changed direction in that way, the things I've studied ultimately come in handy when working in the film industry. It becomes my own characteristic, my advantage, and so on. That's why there's nothing to discard for someone who works in movies.

Oh Sodam *It seems that your video essays may have been influenced by cultural anthropology.*

KIM Hong-Joon I wasn't the type of student who studied diligently in school, and I didn't play a significant role as a cultural anthropologist. However, studying a specific discipline in university seems to give a person a unique kind of culture or sensibility. Anyway, while majoring in cultural anthropology during my undergraduate and graduate studies, some cultural anthropological sensibilities and perspectives must have become internalized in me. But rather than saying that my work directly resulted from studying cultural anthropology, it was just naturally reflected in my work as I continued to create.

Oh Sodam *At that time, when YouTube wasn't as active as it is now, it seems like you were a pioneer of video essays.*

KIM Hong-Joon I didn't have grand thoughts like that... Yes, at that time, the term "video essay" didn't even exist. I just didn't know what to call what I wanted to create, so I made them as I pleased.

Oh Sodam *When watching your video essays titled My Korean Cinema, it seems like you have a tremendous passion for Korean cinema. That's why I personally think that the title of Director of the Korean Film Archive suits you really well. About half of your three-year term has passed. Can you tell us more about KOFA?*

KIM Hong-Joon As you know, the Korean Film Archive is a public organization under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. It can be summarized as an institution that preserves, collects, and utilizes all materials related to Korean cinema. Many people may not know, but in addition to preservation, restoration work is also carried out at the Paju Preservation Center. In Sangam-dong, there is an office, but underground there is a cinemathèque theater, plus a library on the second floor and a museum on the first floor. It is a kind of national service institution for the general public.

We have about 100 employees and an annual budget of around 15 billion Korean won [~11.6 million USD]. Of course, like any other institution, we always feel that we lack personnel and budget. Among the public organizations related to film, the Korean Film Council, the Korea Media Rating Board, and the Korean Film Archive are each responsible for different roles. Although the scale is small, the Korean Film Archive, while taking a step back from the front lines, also plays an important role in supporting Korean cinema as a cultural entity, constantly creating audiences for films, and promoting films. It is a comprehensive cultural and artistic institution with many functions.

Oh Sodam *Can you explain more about the restoration work?*

KIM Hong-Joon KOFA conducts various levels of restoration work. Although the terminology is not unified, we internally divide it into advanced restoration and digitization. Restoration is not as simple as running a computer program and getting immediate results. It is a labor-intensive process that requires a significant investment of time and effort. The most important aspect of film restoration is the condition of the film, whether it is a negative, print, or the extent of preservation damage. It requires a great deal of expertise and technical knowledge. The process involves refining the film into a scannable format and restoring it, much like repairing old clothes. Decisions also need to be made regarding how much to clean the film if it has a lot of dust or scratches. It requires not only technical skills but also cultural judgment.

For example, in the case of the historically significant Korean film *Aimless Bullet* (1961), there were no negatives left, and the remaining prints were in poor condition, with parts missing, frames damaged, and old handwritten subtitles included. We had to decide whether to remove the subtitles or leave them as a part of the historical record. Additionally, heavily damaged frames had to be meticulously restored using computer graphics. The decision of how much to restore, whether to only fix severely damaged parts or fully restore the entire film, depends on factors such as budget and time frame.

Restoration is not a one-time process. As new technologies emerge and the cultural value of a work evolves, a restoration may need to be revisited in the future. Therefore, it is not a final version. People often mistakenly believed that when digital technology first emerged, restoring a film to digital data meant it was complete, and some private film archives even disposed of the original film after digitization. It was a foolish decision, albeit a brief one. However, as new technologies continue to advance, we can obtain and utilize more information from film, expanding its range of possibilities. That's why the presence of the film itself is considered the most crucial condition for restoration work.

Within the Korean Film Archive, we refer to the level of restoration achievable internally as digitization, while more complex computer graphics work or tasks that require the expertise of restoration specialists are referred to as advanced restoration. In some cases, we also outsource to specialized external institutions for less challenging tasks.

Oh Sodam *Do you hire employees who are capable of restoration work, or do they learn it after joining the organization?*

KIM Hong-Joon Basically, we hire employees who are capable of doing such work, and they gain expertise through practical experience. It is more important to have accumulated experience and policy judgment rather than theoretical complexity. Since the budget is always limited, we need to prioritize. We have to decide which films to restore and to what extent. We strive to apply priorities in a diverse and flexible manner. And most importantly, the potential for utilization is crucial in restoration work.

There are masterpieces like *Aimless Bullet* or *The Housemaid* where no one would question the need for restoration, but if we only focused on such films, the scope of restoration would become narrower. Many films have been accumulated through restoration, and many representative works which can be regarded as part of our cultural heritage have been restored. If we have the opportunity, we also respond flexibly to films

KIM Hong-Joon

of various genres and films from the 1990s and 2000s if there is demand.

For example, there is a horror film from the 1970s that is regarded as a film of cultural importance. Based on the importance of the work in Korean film history, we would probably have to wait 50 years to restore it. However, they want to screen the film at the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival next year. After hearing that, we check that the film is still available and if we have time to digitize it. There was a special retrospective of director Jang Sun-woo at the Udine Far East Film Festival, and there are some of his representative works that have not been digitized. If we have the capacity, we try to restore them, but if it costs too much, unfortunately, we may not be able to do it. These decisions are not just technical, but involve multiple teams coming together to reach a consensus, and the final decision is made by the director.

Oh Sodam

Surprisingly, when I worked at film festivals, it was sometimes difficult to screen films from the 2000s. Do you have copies of relatively recent films at the Korean Film Archive?

KIM Hong-Joon

Since 1997, filmmakers have been legally obliged to submit films to KOFA. To be precise, when a filmmaker wants to release a film in theaters, they have to obtain a film rating from the Korean Media Rating Board. Films that have received a film rating are required to submit a copy to us, and we provide financial compensation for that. In the past, during the era of film prints, the compensation was quite significant. Now, with digital formats, the compensation is much lower, but still, nearly a thousand films per year are submitted to us.

Works that have obtained a film rating are obligated to submit copies to us. However, if a work receives a video rating instead, there is no obligation to submit it. For example, DVDs, which could be classified as videos, are not submitted to us if they only have a video rating and do not get a theatrical release. But if a film rating is obtained, it covers everything. It can be played on IPTV, and we provide some compensation for that. That's why, in terms of theatrical releases, not all the films that come in are actually released films. Films that have obtained a film rating since 1997 in Korea must be submitted to us.

So, automatically, those films are collected. The problem lies in the films that are not rated, such as independent films, and more recently, OTT films. Not only OTT dramas but also movies that are released exclusively on OTT platforms without applying for a theatrical film rating. OTT has become a self-regulated rating system. These films are not our collection targets. We cannot collect them unless we receive them as donations. This is a problem that needs to be addressed in the future. The legal system is not keeping up with the reality.

Also, as a film archive, we preserve and conserve films, but we do not hold the copyright to the films. If you want to screen the films externally, such as at film festivals, you need to obtain permission from the copyright holders. The copyright holders are listed in the audiovisual materials. However, the Film Archive itself does not directly hold the copyright. You need to resolve copyright issues with the copyright holders. Just because a film is old does not mean it is more difficult, and just because a film is recent does not mean it is easier.

KIM Hong-Joon

In Korea, unfortunately, after a film is released and its commercial value is almost depleted, the only place that manages and preserves it is the archive. So, even films from the 1990s and 2000s, if there are no negatives or if we cannot contact the copyright holders, we cannot do much about it. We can only collect and preserve them diligently in the hope that someday we will be able to showcase them.

Oh Sodam

Could you explain the role and importance of film archives to readers from other countries?

KIM Hong-Joon

I think the Korean Film Archive is an exemplary case for three reasons. First, it is an institution that not only preserves films but also comprehensively utilizes them through restoration and service to the public. If we compare it to foreign institutions like the BFI in the UK or Cinémathèque Française in France, they also do this kind of work, handling film culture comprehensively from preservation to restoration and utilization.

Second, this year marks the 50th anniversary of our film archive. Since its establishment in 1974, there have been significant changes, especially with the complete transition of the Korean film industry from film to digital. In terms of preserving the current film culture of a country, especially in relation to digital, KOFA has shown more interest and has been involved in various industries. A notable example is our YouTube channel. It would be great if more people knew about it, especially as the channel receives higher praise overseas. In Korea, there is still less interest in classic films, so there is still much to be done in terms of raising awareness. However, due to the Hallyu wave, Korean films have gained interest from people who are interested in Korean culture, and among them, those who are interested in Korean classic films have their demands met through academic films on YouTube. Our YouTube channel is operated as a model example.

Third, although it is more of a future plan than something in the present, I believe there should be stronger exchanges between film archives, especially in Asia. This includes educational programs between institutions. In the past, exchanges between archives were primarily focused on collecting films from one institution to another. However, in the future, it would be great if new generations of film researchers and industry professionals could utilize their own country's film archives to preserve their works as cultural heritage. Currently, Southeast Asian films are experiencing significant growth. During this growth process, film archives with a certain scale and history can provide assistance and opportunities for us to learn from each other. So, I have been thinking about strengthening exchanges between personnel and institutions, but I feel like I will run out of time before my term ends.

Oh Sodam

Your term seems shorter than expected.

KIM Hong-Joon

Yes, and because it is a public institution, we need to do budget planning a year in advance, so three years pass by quickly. Moreover, next year is the 50th anniversary of the Film Archive, so I am thinking about what to do to commemorate it. However, I feel that we are not as well-known as I thought, so instead of just celebrating, I want to promote the existence of KOFA in conjunction with the 50th anniversary. If people simply know what we do, they will surely show a lot of interest and affection. Even if they don't know what a film archive is or if they think it is just a place where old films are stored, I

KIM Hong-Joon

want to change that perception.

In the pandemic, we were unable to provide services for almost three years, but now with some restrictions lifted, new audiences are returning, especially among the younger generation. So, I hope the Korean Film Archive can become a hot place for young people, where they can experience various film cultures from around the world, rather than just being a senior theater. Even with many limitations, I am trying my best to achieve that goal within the given conditions, and I think we are starting to see some progress.

Oh Sodam

Finally, in order to increase interest in classic films both domestically and internationally, what direction should we take? It seems like YouTube has a significant impact.

KIM Hong-Joon

First, please subscribe and turn on the notification for the YouTube channel called "Korean Classic Film." It has about 820,000 subscribers, and 80% of them are international subscribers.

To increase interest in classic films, it is important to set a clear target audience and use appropriate promotional strategies for that audience. It's not about just creating a lot of content or focusing on one thing to achieve immediate visible results. In our case, we have channels dedicated to Korean classic films and animation films. We also have a channel that uploads various video materials related to film culture. We have a website, and we print publications like "Archive Prism" as well as Blu-rays and DVDs.

Simply promoting classic films doesn't guarantee that people will watch them. The important thing is to make people aware that films are not just commercial movies provided to audiences within the logic of the film industry, but they are also a form of culture. We need to help people find ways to enjoy and appreciate films as a cultural experience. When that happens, naturally, there will be a demand for classic films, and interest and audiences for classic films will be formed. Therefore, I believe that the purpose of audiovisual materials is to expand and deepen the diversity of film culture. We can't force people to watch classic films, but rather, I hope that people will see them as a space where they can find their own memories, not just for the elderly audience who watched those films when they were young.

In the second half of the year, we plan to start UHD, 4K services as well. We will screen films and utilize them in conjunction with that. We are currently working on the 4K restoration of the 1986 film *Mulberry*. It is an important work, but also our most viewed video on YouTube with over 40 million views worldwide. So we want to promote it by screening the restored version and inviting the director to have a discussion. It would be great if even one or two more people become interested and made time for it.

In addition, in Korea, filmmakers have shown a lot of interest in the Korean Film Archive and have been helping us a lot. Although it may seem like the archive and the industry are unrelated, they are actually closely connected. After all, when a film, which is initially a commercial product, reaches the end of its life as a commodity, it gains new value through preservation and management in the archive. So, we really need a lot of support for archives. Also, Korean filmmakers are usually willing to help us when we have requests. We recently contacted director Park Chan-wook, who is very busy, to see if he could

KIM Hong-Joon

participate in a screening event commemorating the 20th anniversary of *Oldboy*, and he gladly accepted. The support from people in the industry is crucial, as well as the future filmmakers who may emerge from the audience who visit our archive. There is a lot of work to be done.

by Oh Sodam (sodam.oh325@gmail.com) studied Film Studies as an BA Liberal Arts graduate at King's College London, and has worked in various roles at international film festivals, including the London Korean Film Festival and the Busan International Film Festival. In 2023 she graduated from the International Film Business Academy at the Busan Asian Film School (AFIS).



RANA EID

Sound Designer

Lebanon

Interview by Nadine ASMAR



Born in 1976 in Beirut, sound designer Rana Eid received a BA in Cinema in 1999 and a MA in Film Sound in 2002 from Saint Joseph University of Beirut – IESAV. In 2002, she traveled to Paris where she received training in Sound Editing. Ever since, she has worked as a sound editor and soon became one of the Lebanese film industry’s most acclaimed practitioners. Having collaborated with many of the most critically acclaimed Arab directors and producers, she finally established in Beirut in 2006 her audio post-production studio, DB Studios. Rana also directed her feature documentary debut *Panoptic* (Locarno, 2017) and collaborated with the team of *Honeyland* (2019), among others, which received a double nomination at the Oscars, granting her a place among members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



Nadine Asmar

You started your career in the early 2000s in the sound department after majoring in sound, when it’s mostly common to follow the path of directing, ignoring any other element that makes a film. A few years later, you co-founded DB Studios specializing in audio post-production, and opened eyes on the importance of sound. How did this whole journey start and lead up to establishing a sound studio, especially in Lebanon?

Rana Eid

Everything started in the Lebanese Civil War during the Israeli raid in 1982. I was six, staying in the shelter, not aware of anything going on around me. But back then, there was a radio that my parents used to listen to the news, so I used it without knowing that I was actually recording. Throughout the war, I kept on recording sounds in the shelter and music from the radio. This process helped me overcome my fears. Later on, I understood through therapy that the simple act of listening to my recordings is a way of reassuring myself that my parents and I are still alive.

My mother was crazy about cinema and used to force me to watch films. She still feels disappointed if I miss a certain film. I also loved physics and math at school, and recording on the radio stayed a hobby for me without my even knowing that this could actually be a job. When I learned about the audiovisual sector, I said “Why not?”, but I didn’t know that there was a specialty in sound until the first class of sound. This is when I realized that I cannot do anything else. I even discover new places at first through sound, with my eyes closed.

So, I started thinking about the sounds of the city and the films that used to be made, especially the fact that all sound designers and editors were mainly from France. I felt that this isn’t Beirut, this isn’t the ambiance of the city. Then, later on I discovered that sound is beyond recording on set. I loved sound designing especially, that it goes beyond the technical aspect and offers a greater creative span, be it political or social, and I connected to it much more. I finally went to France to get hands-on experience through several internships over one and a half years with different sound editors and designers. It’s all thanks to producer Humbert Balsan whom I met when I worked on Yousry Nasrallah’s *The Gate of Sun* and Randa Chahal Sabbag’s *The Kite*.

After learning in France, I got my work permit, but I didn’t feel at ease staying there. I came back to Lebanon where the war had ended and hope still existed, and I wanted to be part of the change taking place in the country. I also wanted to open a studio back then, but I realized that this job is still unknown, so I put up a small studio at home. That’s when I felt that I’m going to struggle doing this, and decided to quit cinema, telling my father that I failed and was going to become a CDs seller.

But then I was contacted by [editor] Michèle Tyan when she was opening her post-production company [Djinn House], and she asked me to take in charge of the sound department. I felt that this was the chance I was waiting for. I didn’t want to be employed by someone forever, but I knew that this was the way to begin establishing something. And indeed, I stayed for one year, then opened my own studio in 2006 [the year of the 34-day war in Lebanon] as part of a political stand that I’m staying here no matter what. Everyone told me that I was taking a big risk in making such an investment, especially with my financial limitations and the unknown work of sound design. But for me, just like any other product that uses advertising to create the need for it, I believed in creating the

Rana Eid

need for sound design.

Nadine Asmar

Usually, filmmakers in Lebanon and Arab countries tend to go to European countries to do the sound post-production work, and are willing to spend a big budget on that. Yet, you defied this phenomenon which is still ongoing, mainly due to certain funding rules. How did you grow and expand an audio post-production studio in a small country like Lebanon where there's no infrastructure for cinema in the first place, reaching so many countries and filmmakers around the world?

Rana Eid

You need to make compromises. If the target is only to make a living, despite its crucial necessity, you'll fail. If you want to make something outside of the system, you will succeed. That's why my compromise was refraining from asking for a large fee in the beginning, since I needed experience as well. So, I worked a lot for free. Then, I started lecturing at the IESAV where students were very enthusiastic to do training. So I realized that the interest in sound was growing. That's when I started working with several directors, especially Ghassan Salhab and Mohamed Soueid who trusted me a lot and played a very important role in my career. In fact, they both were a reference in the early 2000s, so everyone wanted to work with their collaborators and try to imitate them.

In the beginning, I used to do the Foley work for free within the package, but then I started introducing Foley, dialogue editing, and so. Back then I was working alone, doing all the sound recording, editing, and designing process which takes a lot of time. So, when I worked on Ghassan Salhab's *The Last Man*, the French producers were already aware of the sound process. So, after seeing the sound work in his film, Lebanese filmmakers started asking me to work with them. That's when I started putting every separate sound work in the quotation.

After being alone in the beginning, now we're a whole team working on every part of the process. We do still suffer financially, especially given that sound is a very expensive process, but that's a compromise you need to make. Despite not having a penny in the bank, my son has everything he needs, and we're happy like this. Just like in physics, when you make a certain movement, the energy will get back to you somehow in the right time. When you have passion for something, this alone can break rocks. Of course, I would have been able to have a lot of money, but this is not what I want. None of the most iconic artists were rich, but they did add something to this world and everyone remembers them, which is not the case for the rich ones.

Nadine Asmar

What did your on-set experience add to your current path as a sound practitioner?

Rana Eid

On set, you train your ears and hearing a lot. You're constantly attentive to the slightest unwanted frequencies while rolling. By nature, I'm not someone who likes to have a lot of people around, and as a sound recordist, you need to silence everyone and control the situation. Also, it is widely known that even when you're shooting in the calmest remote place, once the camera and sound are rolling, all of the most bizarre sounds suddenly appear out of nowhere. I also realized that I don't and won't have the physical capability to stay on set the whole time, and to wake up so early to go to the shoot. I prefer to be alone in an isolated place, which is the studio. And because I loved layering ambiences ever since I was a child, I found this crucial process in the post-production. The on-set work

Rana Eid

helped me a lot technically speaking and taught me how to be disciplined during the take, which I eventually applied in post-production.

Nadine Asmar

In Lebanon, we have too many issues in the film community, primarily due to the limited local opportunities and lack of infrastructure for a legit industry. In your opinion, what is the most important and urgent issue to solve so we can move a step forward? And do you have any idea on how to solve it?

Rana Eid

Ever since the war ended, the question of 'what to do' remains unanswered. Should we try to compensate for what we were deprived of during 16 years of our lives, or should we move forward? Now, we found out that the war never ended and that we're a population who wants to constantly have fear from the enemy, despite not even knowing who he is. It's just in the idea of fighting something. We're actually our own enemy and the 2019 uprising was a carnival in the absence of the poor. You want to make a revolution, you don't take a break to go to the café after the protest.

I'm sorry for being pessimistic, but I made this whole introduction to tell you that it's impossible to have an industry in Lebanon. Imagine having nothing operating in the country, but cinema is operating so well. It doesn't make any sense. It's the way our society is structured. Later on, after the collapse is over, maybe something is going to be done. But now, it's impossible. There are individual efforts and this is how we work, but not in groups. Unfortunately, we don't have competition. Competition would push everyone to do better and to advance to a better state. But this "all of us" doesn't work. And after 2019, it's clear that we didn't question what kind of cinema we want to make. Let's make an assessment and see if our films worked. Will the directors and producers make a self-assessment to their work? Let's try to see where the problem was. Do we simply want to have dollars in our pockets? I need to be fed with new things, discover what they are doing now in sound, and talk with other sound designers. Throughout my 24-year-old career, it saddens me to say that I was never contacted by another sound designer in the country to talk about our work. Not even once.

Nadine Asmar

There have been some talks about the importance of unionizing the "industry" in Lebanon. What do you think about this, especially with your experience as a member of the Motion Picture Sound Editors (MPSE)? What would be the essential elements that need to be considered before actually taking a step towards realizing such a project?

Rana Eid

The collective that they are talking about, I experienced it in *Honeyland* and am currently experiencing it with a group of wonderful people from Sudan and Egypt, to be precise, with Amjad Abu Alala and Ali El Arabi. After Amjad's success with his feature debut *You Will Die at Twenty*, he piled up a lot of screenplays that he currently keeps aside, because he wants to produce for other Sudanese filmmakers, to have a cinema and to give the Sudanese a voice. The most recent example is *Goodbye Julia* which was selected in Cannes Film Festival 2023. They all work together, just like what Iranians, Greeks, and Romanians did.

We don't know how to do this kind of collective. When I met the cinematographer of *Honeyland* in Sheffield where *Panoptic* was screened, he told me that they're a group of five people from Macedonia with nothing but a film, and would like to collaborate with me

Rana Eid

on the sound design. So, I asked him to send me the film, and when I saw the image, I was blown away! I didn't care about getting paid or not, I just wanted to work on the film with them. I was warned by people around me about the risk of taking on this project with no budget, but I had an intuition that this film was going to open a lot of doors. Fast forward, we went to the Oscars. Through this film, and *The Cave* on which I worked as sound editor, I became a member of The Academy.

I was actually criticized for accepting to work as a sound editor under the supervision of someone else, but for me, I still have a lot to learn. So, through those experiences, I understood what could happen when making a film is actually a necessity. Then I was approached by MPSE which I had dreamed of joining, and I couldn't believe that they contacted me. Through MPSE, you have access to conferences and you get help with whatever you need. So, I discovered that the sound community worldwide is an actual family. We even all agreed on not selling sounds to each other, but to exchange them instead. For example, Nicolas Becker used some of my sounds in *Bardo* while other sounds make their way into many other films. Indeed, the sound community is a never-seen-before family, with respect being at the core of it.

Nadine Asmar

As a film producer, what are the main challenges when it comes to bringing a project to the big screen? Is there any way to make things easier? And what is your approach in choosing films you want to produce, given the fact that the market is very limited?

Rana Eid

Actually, I am not a film producer and I don't want to be one. Just like I am a sound designer, and "sometimes a director". But I felt that there is a missing role here which is the one of a creative producer, rather than a producer who deals with the financial part of the film. We need a producer who knows how a screenplay should be written. My friend and student Sandra Tabet was struggling to move forward with a wonderful genre script and was never taken seriously by producers because she didn't play games. She ended up crying and telling me that she will never be able to make this film. Back then, I told her to calm down and that her film will be made. That's when I decided to use my contacts, since people take me seriously and know my name. I simply played the role of the link to put her in contact with actual producers, which is the case of the French producer she's currently working with and whom I met while working on a film project. So, he is following up with her and taking charge of foreign funds, and I'm taking the part of Arab funds.

Being a creative producer helps the script to be well-written instead of being a recipe, which is currently the case of most films, making us lose our identity and isolating talented filmmakers who don't even do those kinds of recipes. When I made *Panoptic*, I created a film that I wanted to see. That's all. So, that's my dream, to make this kind of collective. And let's face it, funds juries will take a project seriously if there's a known name attached to it. Now, Sandra's film is in the radar. But before that, we argued a lot over the script to perfect it and to make real cinema with a necessity, not as a way to get to big festivals. That's also why I rarely go to film festivals, unless there are interesting people I would like to meet. Otherwise, I don't go.

Nadine Asmar

Why do you think cinema in Lebanon has been able to reach the world, despite not having any solid basis compared to bigger countries. Is it the stories, technical aspects, or talent? And what would be the element that could attract more co-productions for

Nadine Asmar

Lebanese stories?

Rana Eid

I don't know the truth, but to me, I think it's because Lebanon is the country where you can talk the most freely among all Arab countries. The country is loose, so you can talk about whatever you want. There's also a certain charm or exotic image of the country for foreigners, whether we like it or not. Despite having censorship, they come here and we can actually solve the censorship issue one way or another. You give a small amount of money and you can close the whole country to shoot your film.

So, we were in the spotlight, but in the end, they got bored. That's our situation right now. We're not on the map anymore. We've got prominent names, have produced around a hundred films, but now it's done. However, the one who has passion and necessity to make a film will eventually do it. It might take longer with a lot of struggles, but it will happen. When I think about how I reached this stage in my life, without having money, I remember how much I struggled and had to go through hell to get to where I am. When you want to do something, you will do it regardless. In fact, they take the assets in the country. The recent example is Saudi Arabia. Now is the time for its cinema.

Nadine Asmar

But the advantage of Saudi Arabia is that it has a big budget and the country is investing in cinema. That's the difference.

Rana Eid

I actually conducted a workshop there, worked on a low budget Saudi short film, and I'm currently working on two new projects. It's fascinating to see their thirst for knowledge in cinema. They read everything. When I conducted the online workshop in Dammam, I was just expecting to do an introductory session. To my surprise, they knew a lot and started inquiring about microphones, ambiences, and room tone. I stayed up all night working in order to gather all the necessary information to answer their questions. These are youngsters who were limited in a way, and now they've been granted the freedom to do whatever they want. It's still early to know if there will be a Saudi cinema or not, but I don't really like the idea of Saudi cinema or other. There are talented people who will appear at some point, and that's it. I mentioned recently in Copenhagen that I'm not known for being the Lebanese sound designer, but simply the sound designer. They collaborate with me because I'm good at what I do, not because I am Lebanese. They know how much I love creating ambiences and working on room tones, to the point of calling me "Rana Room Tone".

Nadine Asmar

Since you mentioned education, what would be your idea, hypothetically speaking, about making a well-structured and effective sound-focused curriculum in Lebanon? What is missing now?

Rana Eid

The capacity to think. Students always ask if there could be some technical education. It's a firm 'no' from me. Just listen in the beginning, then the technique will come gradually throughout the process. When I used to teach, the first few classes were not about sound at all. I wanted to know who they are, how they listen, and if they have the ability to listen, to discuss and think about politics, poetry, etc. That's what's missing, the capacity to think. You need six months to master the technical part, and then what?

Nadine Asmar

Sound has been long disregarded, mainly due to the existence of endless post-production

Nadine Asmar

solutions, such as ADR, to fix almost any encountered problem. Is this perception changing nowadays? And how did the evolution of the situation affect the way you are now working with filmmakers when it comes to audio post-production services?

Rana Eid

Yes, it has changed a lot, also because several good sound recordists came and worked in films, such as Rawad Hobeika. They changed a lot of things. What I also did is to change the quotation of ADR, making it much more expensive on purpose. That hurts especially because I don't accept to make exceptions no matter what. It was painful at first, but this made them pay more attention to sound in their next films. They've grown jealous from good sound, which is mainly good thanks to the good sound recording on set when the recordist is given the time and space they need. Things evolved to the point that we now start working on sound at the script stage, not when we enter the post-production phase.

However, I have a hunch that I won't take a Lebanese film to work on for the moment. I rejected a lot of projects these past couple of years, including a really bad film. When we had a talk about the film, the director didn't take it in a good way anyway. I don't even know how to make sound for this kind of film. So yes, I've become more selective and I'm exhausted from the idea of having no budget when I know that there is actually a budget.

Nadine Asmar

When Panoptic was getting ready to premiere in Lebanon in Ayam Beirut Al Cinema'iya (Beirut Cinema Days) in 2017, it wasn't granted a screening permit by the General Security in Lebanon. As a result, a never-seen-before protest took place inside Metropolis Cinema, raising a voice against the 1947 censorship law. As a response from your side, you decided to share on the big screen a Vimeo link to stream your film for free for three days. Can you elaborate on what happened back then? Why was the film banned, and how did this fight for freedom of speech proceed? Did you find a suitable approach to overcome or avoid any kind of censorship?

Rana Eid

In the beginning, I was very much into protesting against censorship. Now thinking about it, with the presence of Vimeo and Netflix where the film is currently available, they cannot really ban the film. When I submitted the script to get the shooting permit, I sent six screenplays, each one being dedicated to one location. So, to them, I was making six films. For example, I wrote the script of the prison like prose. It took a year to get the permit, but I eventually got it.

When we got to the location, they were surprised by the number of people and cameras involved in the project, which they didn't expect. We had to play the good cop/bad cop kind of game to get as much footage and shooting time as we could. So, the producer Abba Khoury started acting as if she's pressuring me to finish the shooting while I'm playing my part in panicking and asking for more time. Eventually, the military started encouraging me to shoot here and there before she comes and pressures me again. We agitated them while the team placed the cameras and as so relaxed in capturing as many shots for as much time as possible in the most chill environment. We also got several sound crew members to the set, and they couldn't forbid us from doing so, or from shooting whatever we want. So, my work was to be the turbulent person, and their work was to forbid us from shooting. Each one was playing in their own ground.

In the end, my film traveled the world, and unfortunately but also fortunately, when the

Rana Eid

film got censored, over 5000 people watched it on Vimeo in the course of three days, compared to a hundred who were going to see it in Metropolis Cinema. They actually advertised the film in this way, and it ends there. I'm thankful for that. You cannot ban it anymore, and it's my own business why I want to shoot in the prison, for example. If I have to say why, I'll lie since it only concerns me. When they saw the film, they became aware of what happened. I was actually happy that they understood the film. The Lebanese Army didn't mind the film, especially since I am the daughter of a General. But General Security didn't let it slip. They wanted me to remove the shots in which the Army appears, and to delete a sentence in which I say that certain people are not being brought to trial, which is something that we repeat every day on TV. But in cinema, it cannot be said. Anyway, I don't remove a single frame from my film. Since the content is more related to the Army and the latter let it pass, I felt confident about the film getting a permit from General Security. Either way, a film will be banned from time to time. Censorship won't be abolished and I won't have to ask the permission to film anything. I will film it and you won't even know about it, even when it comes to what you don't want me to film.

Nadine Asmar

Artificial Intelligence is now among the most talked about and controversial subjects in the world, given its involvement in every single field, including motion pictures. What is your input on the inclusion of AI in cinema in general, and in sound for film in particular? For example, in the case of some companies that are developing AI tools that could replicate people's voices into different contexts, languages, tones, etc. or provide cleaner versions of an audio track. What are the boundaries that should be put in place? When should AI be used and when should it not be used at all? And would you use AI in your work?

Rana Eid

Never. When I think about the dialogue editor at DB Studios, Vanessa [Kanaan], and the incredibly crazy one-week work she put into removing the sound of a fly throughout a whole film, I would never put her out of work. Since I lived in the period of transition from analog to digital, I remember refusing to bring a computer to my office. Then Pro Tools was introduced and I didn't know how to work with it since many things weren't included in the software compared to analog. But when it advanced and the sound quality became really good like the analog one, the idea of assistant sound disappeared because you don't need to load the reels anymore. But another role was created, which is the one of the data loader, so we still need to listen to everything we have.

I think it's too soon to know if things will be organized properly. Capitalism has no limits. They distract us with something, which is now AI and ChatGPT, but the problem could arise from somewhere else. The world will regulate things in some way. When people lose their jobs, they'll wake up. But the capitalist system doesn't want them to wake up and revolt against it. So, I think that it will be redirected to other things, or a scandal will arise from somewhere just like for other things, and it will be over.

Of course, the world is changing very fast and in a very digital way. I am extremely happy to be 47 now because I'm not ready for such things and to live in this kind of science fiction. So, I feel I am not ready to see the world collapsing. When I look at my son, I feel bad thinking about what awaits him in the future. Yet, I find that we will regulate everything, not because we love humans, but because the capitalist system has no limits and needs to use us.

Rana Eid

So, for the moment, I say that it's impossible to take someone out of his work. If they'll create something that will simplify Vanessa's life, then okay that's great, as long as she's still the operator. No matter how much they'll develop AI, they'll never replace the brain. I am not ready for what they'll be doing in the future, but I am always optimistic when it comes to the human side of people.

by **Nadine Asmar** (nadine_asmar@live.com) is a Lebanese filmmaker with a master's degree in Cinema & Audiovisual from Paris 1 University. She wrote and directed two award-winning short films, *The Blind of the Cathedral* (adaptation, 2015) and *Perhaps Today...* (2017), is currently developing her feature debut, and is in pre-production for a short film dilogy. She is a fellow of the 2023 Busan Asian Film School (AFiS) and an alumna of Talents Beirut, Beirut-Locarno Industry Academy International, and Impact Lab. She gained experience in different departments in award-winning shorts and features, including Lebanon's two Academy Award nominated films, *The Insult* (2017) and *Capernaum* (2018), as well as on the programming teams of several film festivals. Nadine is also a co-founder of MovieTailor Pictures, a film production company based in Beirut, currently producing several projects, including the short documentary *In Zainab's Heaven* (2023).

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals





HO YUHANG LEE YVE VONN

Director / Producer

Malaysia

Interview by Haziqah BINTI AZEMI



Director Ho Yuhang was born in Petaling Jaya and studied engineering at Iowa State University in the US before becoming involved in TV production upon returning to Malaysia. His TV-financed debut feature *Min* (2003) won the Special Jury Prize at the Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes, France. He has won two awards at the International Film Festival Rotterdam -- the NETPAC award for his second feature *Sanctuary* (2004) and the Tiger Award for Best Short for *As I Lay Dying* (2007). *Rain Dogs* (2006) also became the first Malaysian film to screen at the Venice Film Festival in 2006. Subsequent features include *At the End of Daybreak* (2009, NETPAC Award at the Locarno Film Festival) and Malaysia-Hong Kong co-production *Ms. K* (2016). He has also continued to direct various short films, anthologies and TV series (*Folklore*, *Food Lore*, *The Ghost Bride*).

Producer Lee Yve Vonn is a producer at Afternoon Pictures and an alumna of BiFAN's Fantastic Film School, Kyoto Filmmakers Lab, Southeast Asian Producers Network and the International Film Business Academy at Busan Asian Film School. She is the producer of many short films including *Black Hole Monster* (dir. Sim Seow Khee, 2018) which screened at Oberhausen and SeaShorts and *Blind Mouth* (dir. Chris Leong, 2017) which was invited to Taipei Golden Horse and Tampere. More recently she has produced the feature films *Stranger Than Love* (dir. Mallory Lee, 2020); *Hungry Ghost Diner* (dir. Cho We Jun, 2023), which won the NETPAC Award at the 2023 Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival; and *Oasis of Now* (dir. Chia Chee Sum, 2023), which premiered at the 2023 Busan International Film Festival and won the Silver Hanoman at the 18th Jogja Asian-NETPAC Film Festival.



Haziqah BINTI

AZEMI

Ho Yuhang

What's your take on Malaysian narratives?

Well, narrative first and foremost involves language, right? Language reflects the people, like you and me. In Malaysia, it's strange. I mean, our social reality is that we speak different languages and dialects. We are unlike Vietnam – they are more homogenous in a way. At first, it was easy to administer back in the days during the independence and transition era after the British's "divide and conquer" rule. Have a Chinese representative to deal with Chinese people and their problems. It was convenient.

Of course our government tries to create change by imposing Bahasa, which we learn in school, but I grew up in Petaling Jaya in a middle-class urban neighborhood and had no Malay friends in the first 12 years of my life because I went to Chinese school. We have different religious beliefs and speak different languages. It's natural to hang out with the kind of people in our own community. Somehow we don't want to show that version of Malaysia to the world.

When I started with my first films, I could only film the reality that I know best, which is my own people. It would be very condescending to film a Malay story because I don't know anything about them. My immediate reality was my family, my community, my neighbors. We spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, and a bit of Hokkien. My film didn't go over well with FINAS (National Film Commission) because in those days, only films using 90% Malay language and above were considered Malaysian films. So along with other filmmakers I showcased our films outside. We were surprised at the reception. Turns out, the international audience didn't know this alternate reality existed, and they found it interesting. Some even came to Malaysia to actually see the life depicted in my films. It was interesting.

I think more films like these are being made, like Yve Vonn's (*Oasis of Now*, 2023) and yours. I always tell local filmmakers to go outside, see how big the world and the industry is. Don't get stuck in feeling inferior.

Lee Yve Vonn

I was attending a local fringe film festival called Kelantan Film Festival where I met Akbar Rasfanjani, film programmer for Madani International Film Festival. He curated a session at the festival, showcasing Indonesian films. He mentioned something interesting about educating the masses for alternative stories by making these films accessible to the public. Of course you don't show either super hardcore experimental films or slow burn films for introduction. You start with the "easy" stuff first. Curate the films to match the right target audience. Like at the festival, because it was done in a conservative Islamic society, he asked me "How do we showcase films like Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* here? Where is the best place to show it to get maximum reach?" He has been having community screenings at *surau* (praying hall for Muslims) in Indonesia and has started a different kind of cine club that bridges us and the masses. It was a good way to educate the mass audience to appreciate better cinema.

Ho Yuhang

We used to make great films. I recall watching M. Amin's films. One of them was *Hati Batu* (1957). It's a film about a woman who wants to escape the claws of her orthodox, controlling mother-in-law. She's married to a rich family. She's quite sexy in that era. Ogy (Fauziah Ahmad Daud) played the role. Two Malay boys – they're not gangsters, more like

Ho Yuhang

freeloaders – follow her, try to chat with her. She gives them an earful. I remember what she said. “It’s Malay youth like you, who don’t work, who will start bitching at each other upon seeing other races catching up.” I was like, holy shit, this kind of dialogue will be cut off in censorship today, but it was possible before. A powerful social commentary that is still relevant up until today.

I saw another one, could be the same film or another film. The opening scene is very smart because you can’t show decadent things in a Malay film, right? Because it happens in a kind of a whorehouse where people, even Muslims go drinking and whoring, right? So you see a shadow and people walking past and the police come and get them. He was smart at presenting it, not being confrontational, yet not losing the film’s edge. Films like U-Wei’s *The Arsonist* (1995). Great narrative. Very Malaysian.

Lee Yve Vonn

A couple of months back, I watched Everything Everywhere All At Once (EEAAO) in the cinema. This is before they won the Oscars. The film didn’t even stay at the cinema for a long time. I saw some of the scenes, some of the scenes that if a Malaysian film made it, will surely get chopped off by the censorship board. To them, it is their duty to protect the morals of Malaysians. Do they have to stoop so low? Malaysians have no spine to protect themselves, do they? Like, if I see a convert scene in a film, I will want to convert? Sometimes it makes me frustrated. But then again, I am just producing films, I’m not curing cancer so that reality check helped me to get my perspective right.

Haziqah BINTI AZEMI

Do you think we can push for better commercial narratives then?

I think it really depends on what you want to do. Do you want to show your film to the masses? Because if you do, you have to mold your story that way. Like my film, *Oasis of Now*. I know it won’t gain local traction, but it is the film that my director wanted to make, and a film I wanted to produce. Unlike *Hungry Ghost Diner* (2023), I know that film is a lot closer to the local audience. It was produced locally, in terms of the funding and the production company, whereas *Oasis of Now* is made through international co-production and international funding. It all comes back to the story that you’re making and finding an audience that can appreciate it.

Ho Yuhang

You have a point there. I carved out a niche for myself, by differentiating between commercial and arthouse films. But when I study great auteurs like Yasujirō Ozu who directed profound, slightly offbeat films that reflect the zeitgeist of Japan and got his films produced by studios, I start to see storytelling in a different perspective. His films existed during the time Japanese cinemas were flooded with samurai and action films, something people can easily connect to. At that time, people were dealing with many personal problems too. Ozu’s films allow people to watch another thing they can relate with too, realism. His films did well locally and internationally.

It got me thinking deeper when I watched local “commercial” films like *Mat Kilau* and *Paskal* that did extremely well at the local box-office. Take *Mat Kilau* for example. It clocked RM 60 million (US\$ 12.9 million) in ticket sales, and beat Hollywood blockbusters like *Transformers* (RM 25mil box office). Its massive success attracted international investors. Did you know the two Malay box office films, *J-Revolusi* (2017) by Zulkarnain Azhar and *Hantu Kak Limah* (2018) by Mamat Khalid were produced by Andy Lau’s company based

Ho Yuhang

in Hong Kong? However, these films struggle to travel internationally because they lack universal appeal. We on the other hand had our films screened internationally. Is this an opportunity for us? To start making more decent commercial films that do well locally and internationally?

Haziqah Azemi

Can you think of a commercial film that has done well internationally?

Ho Yuhang

Take ghost films for instance. Look at Indonesia. Joko Anwar’s *Impetigore* (2019) is deeply rooted in Indonesian black magic culture, yet it is also universally relevant for international audiences. It was a top 5 grossing film in Indonesian cinema, and had its international premiere at Sundance. Shudder picked it up for global distribution. Think about it. How many cursed woman films had been made? Yet in his film, we are fooled into the world. It feels like we are actually there, stuck with the characters.

You have a choice to make a jumpscare horror film. Very easy. Think *The Conjuring*. But, you can create equally great films without jumpscare. *Hereditary* by Ari Aster (2018). *The Wailing* by Na Hong-Jin (2016). Both films evoke a terrifying mood that scares the hell out of you in a sophisticated way. Not cheapo. Still a commercial success. I feel we still lack that in our cinema. The maturity to tell a good story, even in commercial films. I don’t know why. Maybe because whenever a local filmmaker crafts his or her story, they are still thinking about the local audience. It’s not wrong, but I feel like filmmakers are pitching it too low.

Lee Yve Vonn

True. And it’s not an either/or situation. My previous film, *Hungry Ghost Diner* (2023) was produced like a typical commercial film. It’s a different experience. So, as a producer, you just have to be damn sure what you want for your film, and how you want to make it happen. You don’t want to be caught up in a conflicted situation where you pitch a non-commercial film to a producer who wants to make big bucks in the cinema, especially when you are still developing the film. You will start to get absorbed by other people and kind of lose yourself. It’s a dangerous thing. Everyone has their own story and their own motivation. Then you rush your development to produce it commercially, only to realize two or three years later that you were wrong and you aren’t suited to that kind of producing. I mean eventually it is all a learning curve and you’ll know more about yourself, but do you want to go through that experience? Like, I wouldn’t produce *Oasis of Now* the way I produce *Hungry Ghost Diner*, and vice versa.

Haziqah BINTI AZEMI

What makes a good alternative commercial film then?

Ho Yuhang

If you make a Chinese film, you are looking at your Chinese audience first and foremost. I wouldn’t expect a Malay audience to come read subtitles and want to see a Chinese story. Same goes with Malay films, whether it’s comedy, horror or whatnot, the target audience is still Malay. However, there are cases where crossover happens. Like *The Journey by Chiu* (2014). It started with a Chinese audience, but because so many people talked about it, and it showcased Malaysia beautifully, the places that the masses don’t know, it became a box-office hit and started attracting non-Chinese viewers. Those instances are rare, but you can get lucky.

For me then, the fundamentals of “getting lucky” starts with a good script. Not a novel-

Ho Yuhang

like script, but script that visualizes scenes, and the progressions of it. It is a road map to tell a story visually. And a good story starts with a mature worldview. A perspective. An ability to see things as a whole, both sides equally, whether you have experienced it or not.

I get into many discussions about scripts, and watching young filmmakers' short film edits, I realize one common problem in crafting a good story. They can't sum up the focus of their story. When I ask them, "What is your story about?", they can't tell me. I don't care if you're doing a funny horror film or what. Why do you have to tell it now? Why do you choose to tell it this way? Who and what does the protagonist want? Your film can't just float in existence. I make it sound very scientific, but it really isn't. It's just paying attention to your gut feeling, and being honest if you're bullshitting your way through the story, or if the story has balls.

Lee Yve Vonn

It is worth noting that it's not a one man job. I think the audience is there. Look at local audiences who are watching foreign films. Having a good story to tell is one thing, but we also have to master publicity. How do we break into other markets outside our echo chamber? I wish I knew how films are doing in theaters, but the truth is only distributors and exhibitors have a birds-eye view of the cinema industry, and they're being calculating with the information. I hope there can be an effort to improve transparency.

by Haziqah BINTI AZEMI (zikaatwork@gmail.com) is an emerging writer-producer from Kelantan, Malaysia. She brought seven years of advertising strategy expertise from her time at Naga DDB Tribal and Ogilvy & Mather to co-found the acclaimed production company Kapsul Studio Sdn. Bhd. with writer-director Cech Adrea. Her filmmaking journey commenced with *3R*, an award-winning TV program focused on women's empowerment, where she was one of 12 in-training journalists. Haziqah's debut feature film project, *Garek*, gained recognition at Malaysian International Film Festival (MIFFEST) Project Market 2023, securing the Best Project Presentation award, and was also Malaysia's sole representative at the Bangkok Asian Film Festival (BAFF) SEAPITCH 2023.

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LEOARD TEE

Film Producer

Malaysia

Interview by Eleanor TEH



Leonard Tee is a Malaysian film producer of Chinese origin who works primarily with independent directors. In 2006, he established the Malaysian office of auteur Tsai Ming-Liang's Homegreen Films. He co-produced Tsai's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), which premiered at the Venice Film Festival. He also produced Tsai's short films *It's a Dream* (part of the 2007 omnibus *To Each His Own* which premiered at Cannes), *Madame Butterfly* (2009), and *Walking On Water*.

His more recent credits include *The New Village* (2013) directed by Wong Kew Lit, omnibus film *Day and Night* directed by Ho Yuhang, Charlotte Lim, and Yeo Joon Han (premiered at Rotterdam in 2016), and *You Mean The World To Me* (2017) directed by Saw Tiong Hin. He also produced the Hong Kong film *The White Girl* (2017) directed by Jenny Suen and Christopher Doyle, starring Joe Odagiri, and *Fly By Night* (2018) directed by Zahir Omar, which premiered in Busan and is available on Netflix. His latest work is *Alive With COVID-19* (2023), which is the first Malaysian documentary about the COVID-19 pandemic.



Eleanor Teh

Your initial involvement in the food & beverage industry and ownership of a chain of restaurants in Malaysia is intriguing. I'm particularly curious about your decision to transition into an entirely different field, filmmaking. Could you share your thought process behind this interesting pivot?

Leonard Tee

I have always harboured a love for movies. However, I quickly learned that watching movies and making them are entirely different experiences. My journey into the industry began when I met Tsai Ming Liang, who was in need of assistance with location scouting in Malaysia for his film, *I Don't Want To Sleep Alone*. He candidly asked me if I would be interested in joining him. Admittedly, I had my doubts. Why did he believe I could be a producer? "You'll never know if you don't try it," was his simple response. I'm extremely grateful to have started under the guidance of a mentor of Tsai's calibre. Throughout our collaboration, he provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the industry, including the aspects to focus on, pitfalls to avoid, and most importantly, the qualities to seek in a film.

This venture marked my first exposure to film education, as my university studies didn't involve any film courses. Consequently, filmmaking is not my primary source of income; it's a hobby and a passion. I initially didn't envision filmmaking as a core income source because the process is rather slow. Usually, it takes a significant amount of time to produce or even complete a movie. Nevertheless, I managed to strike a balance between my restaurant business and filmmaking.

Upon reflection, I discovered numerous similarities between the culinary world and the film industry. Consider a dish, like laksa; it could be seen as analogous to a film, with the recipe serving as the screenplay. In theory, if the recipe is publicly available, anyone could attempt to make a laksa. But the dish may lack taste and finesse if prepared by an inexperienced chef. Similarly, with film, the magic lies in how the filmmaker adapts the screenplay and utilises their unique experience and taste to transform an already told story into something truly special.

Eleanor Teh

Could you elaborate on the producer's perspective regarding the similarities between managing a restaurant and filmmaking?

Leonard Tee

Drawing from my perspective, the tasks of managing a restaurant and producing a film bear striking similarities. People visiting restaurants and audiences queuing to watch a film at a cinema share a common purpose: to engage in an experience that transcends the basic consumption of food or entertainment. They're looking for something more, something that taps into their emotions and leaves a lasting impression.

Consider my restaurant. Here, my primary objective is not only to ensure you savour the food but also to guarantee that you appreciate the entire experience that we've crafted for you. The ambience, the environment, the service, the conversation - everything works in tandem to create a memorable evening out. I've taken the time to adorn my restaurant with antiques and decor that I personally find appealing. But I recognize that beauty is highly subjective.

What's aesthetically pleasing to me might not be to you. Still, that doesn't deter me from

Leonard Tee

creating an environment that has an artistic vision. My focus is on enhancing the experience. From the moment you walk through our doors, everything from the decor to the tantalising aromas and the welcoming atmosphere work together to create an experience that, I hope, entices you to return. You come to develop an affinity for that specific brand of subjective beauty that we offer. And more importantly, your entire experience within the restaurant becomes etched in your memory.

The same philosophy applies to filmmaking. Just as in the restaurant business, the film industry is a fast-paced arena that's subject to the ever-evolving tastes and trends of the audience. In a world where people are spoiled for choice with a seemingly endless array of films to choose from, the challenge lies in making your film stand out amidst the competition. The audience doesn't only invest their money in a ticket; they're also investing their time. A trailer or a poster may provide an initial impression of the movie, but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Given the saturated nature of today's film market, I constantly strive to provide the audience with an unforgettable film experience. The world is full of stories, and while some narratives may seem overdone, I firmly believe that each one can be told in a unique and original way. It's my responsibility as a film producer to offer a fresh perspective on a familiar story. The film industry is fiercely competitive, and while it's necessary to keep an eye on market trends and box office performance, my priority always lies in providing an unforgettable viewing experience. I aim to create films that don't just tell a story but also present a unique interpretation of a tale already known, much in the way I strive to provide a unique dining experience in my restaurant.

To put it simply, both managing a restaurant and producing a film share a common goal: to engage, captivate, and leave the audience or customers longing for more. Both ventures are an art form that requires attention to detail, creativity, and a deep understanding of what the audience desires. And ultimately, success in both fields depends on the ability to deliver a unique and memorable experience.

Eleanor Teh

Over the years, I've noticed that you've produced numerous films and short films spanning a range of genres. I'm interested in understanding more about your selection process. What factors influence your choice of story or director?

Leonard Tee

I make it a point to never repeat myself, whether it's in the narrative or the film as a whole. I'm continually looking for fresh and unique projects to undertake. One of the advantages I have is that filmmaking is not my bread and butter, which allows me to take on more challenging, artistic and expressive projects.

When choosing directors, I have certain criteria in mind. I prefer to work with those who are experienced yet still emerging, and they need to have prior experience, such as at least three short films to their credit. Equally important is their ability to communicate effectively and their attitude. It's critical that we can work together harmoniously.

It's essential to understand that I'm not there to serve a director; I'm there to serve the story. You could say that the movie is my "religion", and I'm there to facilitate the story being told. I don't cater to divas or prima donnas. If that becomes the working dynamic,

Leonard Tee

it's likely to reflect negatively on the project and make further collaboration difficult.

It's crucial to remember that as a producer or executive producer, you're often the first person to get involved in a project and the last one to leave. If problematic decisions are made, it's the producers who bear the brunt. Therefore, a positive, collaborative environment is key to a successful film production.

Eleanor Teh

You've conveyed a strong affinity for challenges, as evidenced by your initial role as a co-producer in a co-production with Taiwan. I've noticed that your subsequent films involved collaborations with Hong Kong and, within Malaysia, with various ethnicities. Could you share more about your experience with co-productions, especially those of an international nature?

Leonard Tee

Working with co-productions is indeed an intriguing process. Co-productions encourage you to understand the varying parameters among different countries, particularly

the nuances of agreements. It's crucial to protect the interests of both your company and the director, which can present a challenging balance to maintain. However, the ability to share resources and the anticipation of where the film might land after completion make the process worthwhile.

I typically enjoy engaging in co-productions. When I develop a slate of films, usually around four to five, I incorporate directors I'd like to work with or those who already have projects that can merge into my slate. I advocate for these projects and, as a producer, understand that some films might materialise faster than others.

Working in the co-production sphere requires a solid grasp of different countries' laws and regulations. A significant challenge lies in bringing everyone onto the same page.

When soft money is involved in a project, it's crucial to make sure that everyone understands that co-productions often take time to yield returns. We also have to consider potential outcomes, whether the movie might underperform or score a massive success at the box office.

Co-productions also provide a unique opportunity to understand the market situations in different countries, like France or North America. These regions have distinct perspectives and storytelling styles, so it's essential to align all elements to create a coherent picture. It's an engaging learning experience and a complex process, but the insights gained and the creative outcomes can be genuinely rewarding.

The most challenging aspect isn't necessarily monetary; rather, it's determining who holds the creative decision-making power. It's critical to clarify this from the outset. Furthermore, you need to discern whether decisions are being made based on creativity or business factors, as these are distinct considerations. That's why it's essential to have crystal-clear communication throughout the process. By ensuring everyone involved understands their roles and responsibilities, you can create a cohesive understanding of what the end product should be.

Eleanor Teh

I'm curious to know what place filmmaking occupies in your professional life.

Leonard Tee

It's all about passion for me. Without passion, you wouldn't have the endurance to continue working without immediate rewards before a project comes to fruition. I don't work on drama series or TV commercials; I focus solely on feature films. Alongside this, I do produce some documentaries, but these are primarily short films often associated with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or community service work.

Eleanor Teh

Considering your impressive track record, having produced over ten feature films and multiple short films, have you ever contemplated directing? Is that an aspect of filmmaking that interests you?

Leonard Tee

Yes and no. Being a director involves a considerable amount of thinking, and that process can be very tedious and time-consuming. Given my current schedule, I don't have the luxury to set aside six months simply to write a script. I don't author stories; I contribute concepts. If you bring a story to me, I'll review it and share my thoughts. I might suggest changes or propose new directions based on my experience. However, I try not to drastically alter people's stories, as that can lead to losing the essence of why they wanted to shoot it in the first place. My aim is to offer suggestions that make the product more accessible. After all, when you accept soft money from investors, you need to consider the return on investment.

Many young filmmakers find it easy to produce independent films, but they need to consider their future career paths. Will they continue making the same type of independent films? Will they be able to reach a broader audience? In our environment, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and throughout Southeast Asia, an appreciation for independent or arthouse films isn't a typical part of our viewing habits or patterns. If your first film is labelled an 'arthouse' or 'independent' film, it could be a difficult journey ahead.

Eleanor Teh

It's somewhat limiting, like being caged. However, it's essential to consider the broader perspective.

Leonard Tee

Indeed, that's a dilemma I've seen many people face over the years. They want to break free, but it's incredibly difficult. It's akin to attending a job interview. If your resume indicates that you've worked at company A for three years, company B for three years, and company C for three years, and these roles aren't related or within the same field, what kind of impression are you making on your interviewer? It's a similar scenario in filmmaking. If your first movie is labelled an arthouse film, and the second one as well, then you claim your third movie is going to be a box office success, will people believe you?

General impressions matter greatly. For instance, take a film director whose track record is completely arthouse. They do excellent work with their films. But, hypothetically speaking, if they were to create a Chinese New Year movie targeted specifically at the Malaysian Chinese market, and then they were to approach a commercial film studio such as Astro Shaw to pitch their idea, don't you think they might hesitate? They'd likely take some time to re-evaluate and assess the project's suitability, wouldn't they?

Leonard Tee

And when a director approaches me, I have numerous questions to ask. I need to understand where this story is coming from and what's going on in your mind. I'm also interested in knowing where you see yourself in the next five or ten years. Let's take, for example, Zahir Omar, the director of the crime genre film *Fly By Night*. After *Fly By Night*, he's been doing very well. He's shot with Amazon Prime Video, and I believe he's worked with Joko Anwar in Indonesia. People can now recognize his unique style and know that he can deliver on his vision.

Eleanor Teh

From your perspective, how do you think we can improve the Malaysian film industry?

Leonard Tee

It comes back, again, to creativity and storytelling. We may not possess the same skill set and experience as the Koreans, but we can definitely learn a great deal from them. The path to improvement doesn't rest on just me or what I can do. It's about the community. We need a substantial community to understand what everyone is doing, and to collaborate and support each other. This support system, especially from the private sector, our industry, and the government, is extremely crucial.

I find that in Malaysia, a lot of people believe that if they have a story and a script, they can immediately start shooting a movie. But they don't think through the entire process. There isn't always someone to tell them whether the story is workable, how they're going to distribute it, whether they are going for a wide release, or if it's just for a small festival. Young filmmakers need to converse with more experienced individuals to gain an understanding of the correct steps to take when they have a story.

While I encourage new ideas from young filmmakers, they need to realise that as creatives, they should be able to create multiple stories. If you only have one story and you believe it's the best one you'll ever come up with, there might be a blind spot in your perspective. Producers and directors need to have multiple projects in their slate. Even film school teaches you this. You create a slate, every story is precious, but it depends on who's the investor you're meeting. You should be able to take a suitable story from your pocket and tell it from your point of view.

In Malaysia, I hope that people don't jump to conclusions too quickly. It's important to take the time to think through things from start to finish. What's next after you finish a project? Who is going to help with distribution? How will you distribute your film to the audience? Distribution carries costs, and these costs matter to the distributor and the exhibitor, especially when it comes to cinema chains.

Eleanor Teh

Is there any piece of advice that you would give to your younger self, before you started producing, or to a new, emerging filmmaker?

Leonard Tee

Don't start with just one genre or character, and try to explore as much as you can. Don't limit yourself to thinking that you just want to do arthouse cinema. If you are a good creator, you should be able to tell any kind of story with your own unique style. Don't get stuck with just one formula.

You can shoot horror, action, drama, or any type of story, but don't limit yourself. That's the only advice I would give to my younger self or to the younger generations. Be more

Leonard Tee

open-minded to seeing and watching movies, to getting in touch with different filmmakers from various countries, and learning from them. It's just like what you're doing - it's a very good start, especially when you can learn from others, especially the Korean film industry. They have a very close-knit community, and they support each other.

To me, it's like you can disregard race and language. Language is not important at all. It's only important to a certain extent because a lot of people in Southeast Asia don't understand Korean. Yet, Korean culture and language are still very popular because of the content they offer.

Eleanor Teh

I have one final question for you. Do you have a new project in the pipeline?

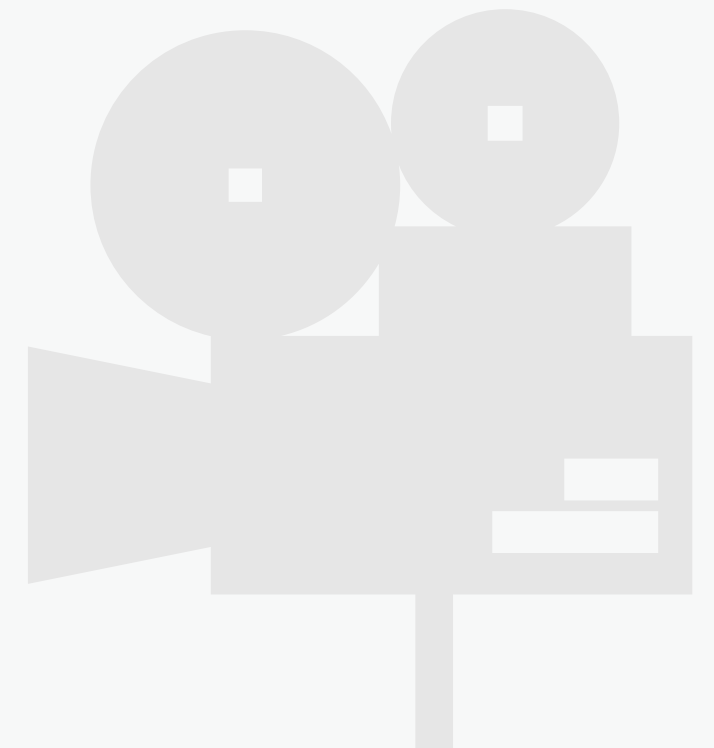
Leonard Tee

Normally, I maintain a slate of projects. As I mentioned earlier, I typically have five titles on my slate. And currently, I am actively engaged in one of these projects. Among the various genres I find intriguing, body horror stands out as a particular area I'm interested in exploring.

by

Eleanor Teh (eleanor.zian@gmail.com) is a film producer from Malaysia. She started her corporate experience in both accounting and finance in the UK and then decided to take a fascinating journey into the world of filmmaking. Embracing her corporate experience, Eleanor's love for numbers and Excel skills became her trademark. Currently developing her first feature film, *Under Foreign Skies*, Eleanor is an alumnus of mylab 2023 and Busan Asian Film School 2023.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals





ZOLJARGAL PUREVDASH

Director / Producer

Mongolia

Interview by Munkhkhishig DASHTSEREN



Zoljargal Purevdash is a Mongolian filmmaker who studied filmmaking in Japan. She is the founder of Amygdala Films, an independent film production company based in Ulaanbaatar. Her debut feature film, *If Only I Could Hibernate* (2023), is the first Mongolian film to be selected for the Official Selection at Cannes and had its world premiere in the Un Certain Regard section. Her previous short films have screened at Locarno Film Festival, Short Shorts Film Festival & Asia, and Cinequest Film Festival. Her short film *Stairs* (2020) won the first prize at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival and was entered into the 94th Oscars in the Best Short Film category. Zoljargal is an alumnus of Talents Tokyo, Berlinale Talents, Asian Film Academy, and Torino Film Lab Extended.



Munkhkhishig Dashtseren

What motivated you to pursue filmmaking? How did you start your journey as a filmmaker?

Zoljargal Purevdash

I was someone who always wanted to tell nice stories, whether a movie or TV show, just to encourage my generation and the younger generation. I grew up in a suburban area of Ulaanbaatar city. My mom owned a small corner shop where I often had to assist her. Our customers came from various backgrounds, some facing issues like alcoholism, poverty, and mental health issues. They would bring their young children along. Every time I saw these vulnerable kids, I would want to give them some hope and share good feelings. I asked myself where I found good feelings, and the answer was in movies. So, I wanted to become like an elder sister who could create nice shows on TV and give these kids a sense of hope. This wish originated during my teenage years and gradually developed over time.

I got a chance to get into in a good high school, which happened to have a drama club. Prior to joining the club, I never dared to consider becoming a filmmaker because it was often perceived as a financially unstable and risky career choice. Thanks to the drama club, I instantly fell in love with acting, drama, and directing. I was just captivated by the art itself.

During my final year of high school, our school established a special agreement with J.F. Oberlin University in Tokyo, Japan, which offered two students full-ride scholarships. Luckily, I got selected, and with a scholarship in hand, nothing could stop me from pursuing my dream of studying filmmaking. It was a combination of luck and a calling that led me to this path. That's how it all started.

Munkhkhishig Dashtseren

Before making your feature film, you crafted several short films. What inspired the stories behind these films?

Zoljargal Purevdash

I don't know. Scenes and ideas would just come to mind. They come from a big sense of wonder. For example, I made *Naked Bulb* (2020) because I was wondering how those women live without expressing their sexual desires while their husbands are away working as migrant workers abroad for many years. The story was also inspired by very personal experience. I felt isolated, with nobody to talk feely about it because my husband was working in Japan.

Yellow Bus (2023) is set around the time when the city introduced a smart card system on the buses. I saw a bus conductor sitting at the front seat of the bus, looking very sad. They used to be the queens and overseers of the entire bus. They would confront drunkards and protect passengers, ensuring that social norms were upheld. It was strange to witness this once vibrant conductor now appearing spiritless. She looked like she had become "useless". Soon after, those ladies disappeared. It made me contemplate how technology renders humans useless. I began questioning the path we are heading as a society. Do we truly need to transition into a digital nation? Are we prepared for the changes that lay ahead?

Munkhkhishig Dashtseren

Your debut feature, If Only I Could Hibernate (2023) is the first Mongolian film presented at Cannes' official selection. What was the genesis of this film?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

I made an experimental short film called *Burgundy* back in 2013. It is also a story about a boy who has an alcoholic father and is trapped in a terrible situation. When I re-watched *Burgundy*, I realized that it all started from there. The core idea of my feature film was present in my first short film. Actually, I tried to make a narrative short with a hundred-dollar budget. But everything was a disaster and I had to turn it into some experimental work. I was so disappointed with the final result. It taught me the importance of working with a sufficient budget and ensuring a good experience for everyone involved. That may be why it took five long years of planning and preparation before making my first feature.

The story of *If Only I Could Hibernate* stems from a deep frustration and offence because Ulaanbaatar is the most polluted capital city in the world. 60 percent of its citizens live in the ger districts, where they burn coal for survival during harsh winters that can drop to -30°C (-22°F). In 2017, Ulaanbaatar's citizens became aware of the toxic air pollution and protested against it for the first time. But I felt offended by the slogan focusing solely on eradicating the smoke. As someone who grew up and still lives in the ger district, I know firsthand that no one burns coal to harm others—it is simply a means of winter survival.

Apartment dwellers blamed and resented ger district residents. So, it was very hard for ger district people to go and join the demonstration. I realized we had become so isolated from each other. It made me so sad that there was a lot of hate and anger. The good thing is that everybody wants to solve this problem, but they are wasting their energy on only the symptoms. What we smell and breathe is not smoke, but poverty.

So, I wanted to make a film that could show the true reasons behind air pollution. I didn't only want to complain about the problems, but also to show the solution. The protagonist, a hardworking 15-year-old boy, yearns to escape poverty and pursues a quality education. At the same time, he has to carry the weight of household responsibilities on his young shoulders. This film follows a simple and classic three-act plot. There is no explicit dialogue or conversations about air pollution. It is just a family story, where the only antagonist is poverty and air pollution. I don't even blame the alcoholic mother.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

What was the scriptwriting process?

It was quite a long process. I started in 2017, and participated in a script writing lab in 2018, and I kept writing until 2020. During the process, I realized that poverty is not exclusive to Mongolia, but rather a universal issue of societal polarization between the rich and the poor. I just have to tell this universal story with a unique Mongolian perspective, incorporating distinct Mongolian elements. As a scriptwriter, it was essential for me to delve into this aspect and it took four years.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

You often collaborate with non-actors.

What is your approach when working with them?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

As a novice director, I tend to avoid extreme measures such as completely transforming actors into someone entirely different from themselves. I also don't trust that process. I think people only can act themselves on screen. While there may be exceptionally talented actors who can embody various roles, they are rare. Instead, I prefer to work with a select few professional actors whom I truly admire and who have a natural ability to

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

inhabit their characters.

Otherwise, I search and cast non-experienced people who possess similar traits and backgrounds to the characters in my script. After the casting, I do rehearsals. Rehearsals don't need to happen many times, but they should be thoughtful within the limited two-hour timeframe. I am always super honest with the actors and provide clear instructions that they can easily understand and follow.

When I worked with child actors in *If Only I Could Hibernate*, I approached them with respect and honesty. Kids are perceptive and compassionate. They also want to solve the air pollution problem because it directly affects their lives. I don't see them as just children. I treat them as equals, like adults. I was super honest with them, so they became honest with me.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

I heard that your production team consisted entirely of Mongolians. Could you elaborate on your film crew?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

Yes, my entire shooting crew was composed of Mongolians. I was a first-time director, producer, and writer for a feature film. I worked with a team of fellow first-timers including my director of photography, production designer, and producer. It's just because I have several rules that I always want to follow. Considering that we were shooting in the midst of winter during the COVID pandemic, and with many child actors involved, we faced many challenges. The sunsets were early and we had to complete our shooting within six to seven hours each day.

So before shooting, I shared the script with the crew and explained why I am making this film. I expressed my frustration with the decision-makers' inaction towards air pollution, and the lack of efforts to address the root causes of the problem. The reality is that my film crew, including their children, are all breathing this toxic air. Their children fell ill throughout the winter, constantly coughing and relying on antibiotics. Feeling the pain, they all became so passionate about the project. Despite being first-timers, our shared passion was unwavering.

For the assembly editing, I worked closely with my Mongolian editor. Additionally, we were fortunate to receive post-production grants from France and Qatar, which enabled us to carry out the post-production process in Paris. Opting for editing, sound mixing, color correction, and other elements of post-production in Paris was a wise decision since post-production in Mongolia still needs significant development.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

As the director and producer of the film, what was the most challenging aspect of making this project?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

It wasn't intentional, but rather a result of not finding a producer who could truly advocate for my project. After feeling down for a year, I realized I couldn't wait for someone to save me. I had to save myself. So, I took on all the roles. Through my previous short films, I learned the importance of having an experienced co-producer or line producer who can handle tasks during the shooting, allowing me to focus solely on directing, at least during the shooting. Finding the right co-producer was essential, and luckily, I had the privilege

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

of working with the talented Batkhishig Sed-Ayushjav, who brought her extensive documentary experience and connections to the table. Of course, securing funding is the most challenging aspect for a producer. I took on the responsibility of this difficult task and my co-producer handled the task of managing and allocating the funds wisely.

Taking on the roles of both producer and director granted me a sense of freedom, even though it came with the demanding task of securing funding. Despite the challenges, I found it to be a manageable and empowering experience. As I move forward, I may choose to continue working in this dual role while also seeking producers who can provide creative freedom.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

Could you tell me about your French producers?

My French producers, Frédéric Corvez and Maéva Savinien, came on board before the shooting. Due to my inexperience, I had prematurely applied for most of the post-production funds. Fortunately, we were able to secure the Aide aux Cinémas du monde fund from France. Working with my producers has been a wonderful experience as they provide feedback and share their thoughts while respecting my final decisions. Frédéric was my mentor when I was in Talents Tokyo in 2017. He has been keeping an eye on me for all these years and continuously follows my work. There is a deep trust between us. Additionally, their sales company, Urban Sales, is handling the distribution and festival participation for my film. I am genuinely happy with this collaboration and hope for more partnerships like this in the future.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

What sets Mongolian cinema apart from the rest of Asia and makes it unique?

It's a challenging question. Mongolian cinema, in my opinion, has not yet fully discovered its unique identity. Unfortunately, I don't consider the films produced during the Soviet period as representative of our true essence. Despite having a rich cinematic history since the 1930s, our filmmakers had to contend with oppressive censorship and the use of cinema as a propaganda tool. I hold great respect for the older generation of directors who struggled to tell their stories under such circumstances. However, I believe Mongolian cinema is only now beginning to find its voice, its distinct visual styles, and its portrayal of our identity. We are still in the process of discovering our uniqueness.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

How do the younger generation of Mongolian filmmakers differ from the previous ones?

I can only speak for myself, not for the entire younger generation of Mongolian filmmakers. Personally, I am conscious that filmmaking doesn't have to serve as an educational or propaganda tool. I am not obligated to make films for the purpose of promoting tourism or showcasing the greatness of Mongolia. That is not my responsibility. I have more freedom. This is where I differ from the older generations. I only have an obligation to pay taxes. It is true that cinema has a powerful impact, and I want to use that power to make society better, but in a different way. I want to tell untold stories, particularly those of minorities or marginalized segments of society. I don't aim to enlighten society; that would be too much. My goal is to foster empathy among people. That's where I believe I differ and what I aspire to achieve.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

Could you recommend some Mongolian films?

Personally, I am a big fan of Byambasuren Davaa and I love her works. I cried watching her films. So, I recommend her *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003) and *The Two Horses of Genghis Khan* (2009). These films left me amazed, and I feel no need to explore similar topics in my own work. I am also looking forward to watching her recent feature *Veins of the World* (2020). She is a really notable filmmaker.

If you're interested in experiencing modern Mongolia, I recommend exploring the works of another talented director, Byamba Sakhya. Another one of my personal favorite films is the comedy *Shine Usgiin Bagsh* (1998) directed by *Badruugan Badraa*. It's a really entertaining movie to watch.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

Could you share some insights on the current state of the film industry in Mongolia, considering the recent establishment of the Mongolian National Film Council and Mongolian Film Fund following the approval of a film law in 2021? Have you had any experience working with them thus far?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

I'm delighted that we now have a film law and the establishment of the National Film Council. They have recently announced the first recipients of the Mongolian Film Fund. I was unable to receive support for my current project as it was already shot two years ago. However, I hope to apply for support for my next project.

I am grateful for the new film law that states the government will support the travel expenses of selected filmmakers to major festivals. Our cinematographer and co-producer received support to attend the world premiere of *If Only I Could Hibernate* (2023) at Cannes. It is crucial for Mongolian filmmakers to be present at such festivals and represent themselves.

I believe the National Film Council is doing a commendable job, as evidenced by Mongolia having its own booth at Cannes, Venice, and Busan. This provides an opportunity to promote Mongolian films and the local film industry. They are also actively working on attracting foreign productions to shoot in Mongolia, which is beneficial for our local industry's growth and allows young talents to gain valuable experience working on these projects. It will also bring economic benefits through fostering relationships with foreign productions. So, I'm very optimistic about their work.

But again, I believe it is crucial for the National Film Council to exercise caution regarding censorship. It is important for all of us to closely pay attention to the projects they choose to fund and the permissions granted. Maintaining a balanced approach is of utmost importance to preserve the integrity of the film industry. I am particularly attentive to this aspect.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren
Zoljargal
Purevdash**

What advantages does Mongolia offer to international producers?

I believe Mongolia can offer similar advantages as any other country. I don't believe in the notion that Mongolia is greater than other countries. We are all part of the same universe

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

and share similar experiences, emotions, and challenges. However, one advantage we may have is that our stories may be less explored or discovered.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

How is the independent film sector in Mongolia doing? Are they financially sustainable?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

In Mongolia, all films can be considered independent as we don't have a major studio system like Hollywood. Even the larger production companies operate independently. As for the financial sustainability of independent films, it varies from project to project.

As a first-time feature film director and producer, I am still learning the ropes of the industry. Currently, my primary focus is on selling and marketing my first film. This involves honing my producer skills, especially in terms of the business aspects of filmmaking. I successfully secured investments private companies, NGOs, and international organizations in Mongolia for the production of my film. However, it also means that I have the responsibility to repay most of these investments in the future. Let's see how it unfolds.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

Are you interested in directing series or films for OTT platforms in the future? What are your plans for the future?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

I plan to direct two more feature films before exploring other avenues. After that, I am open to transitioning into producing or working on series and exploring different opportunities. However, for the next few years, while I am young and passionate, I want to focus on directing feature films.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

Do you have any other upcoming projects?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

Yes, I am currently working on my second feature film. *If Only I Could Hibernate* is in good hands with Urban Sales as my partner, handling the distribution. My focus now is on preparing for the Mongolian premiere. Meanwhile, I am also writing my next film.

**Munkhkhishig
Dashtseren**

What is it about?

**Zoljargal
Purevdash**

I love to take on challenges, so I'm exploring dark comedy in my next film. I discovered a glimmer of hope in my ability to write comedy while working on *If Only I Could Hibernate*, as there were some genuinely funny and comedic scenes in the film. So, I decided to give dark comedy a try.

In the global film industry, it is quite common for projects to span several years, even up to a decade. While this duration might be perceived as lengthy in Mongolia, I have come to realize that it is a normal process. So, it is obvious that my next project will demand a significant time commitment and become a central part of my life. The film will address a painful social issue, and my goal is to employ a satirical and comedic approach. By doing so, I aim to avoid personal depression while providing a fresh perspective on the subject.

by **Munkhkhishig Dashtseren (munkhkhishig.da@gmail.com)** is a scriptwriter, producer and literary translator from Mongolia. She worked as a line producer on the short film *Naked Bulb* (2020) by Zoljargal Purevdash, which was selected for the Spotlight section of the Osaka Asian Film Festival. She also served as the original story writer for *Dancer* (2023) by Nomin Gantulga, which was selected for the 40th Chicago International Children's Film Festival. In 2023, Munkhkhishig was selected as a fellow of the International Film Business Academy at Busan Asian Film School.



ABINASH BIKRAM SHAH

Screenwriter / Director

Nepal

Interview by Prabin Kumar RAWAT



Abinash Bikram Shah is an alumnus of Locarno Filmmakers Academy, Berlinale Talents and the Asian Film Academy. He directed numerous short films that have won acclaim at international film festivals, including *I am Happy* (2011, Busan International Film Festival), *The Moon is Bright Tonight* (2018, Busan International Film Festival), and most notably *Lori* (2023), which premiered in the Cannes short film competition section and won a Jury Special Mention. As a screenwriter he contributed to Deepak Rauniyar's *Highway* (2012, Berlin International Film Festival) and Min Bahadur Bham's *The Black Hen* (2015, Venice Film Festival), among others. He also scripted two of Nepal's most popular TV series. He is currently preparing his directorial feature debut, *Elephants in the Fog*.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

First of all, congratulations on winning the Jury Special Mention at Cannes 2022 for your short film LORI (MELANCHOLY OF MY MOTHER'S LULLABIES). How do you feel about this remarkable achievement, and what impact do you think it will have on your future projects and the Nepali film industry as a whole?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Thank you very much. This award has brought two major changes to my life in particular. The first one is that as a creative person, people tend to struggle with a lot of self-doubts. "Am I doing it right?", "Is my film good enough?", "Do people understand what I am trying to say?". Being awarded at Cannes gave me that validation, the assurance that maybe whatever I'm doing, I'm doing it right.

The second one is that it also validated other people's trust in me and my skill. They have faith in my vision and ideas, now more than before. And this applies to not just me. Everyone else in my team has felt the same, as well. It's too self-centered to say my film drastically changed the film industry due to its Cannes win. Yet, I like to hope that for young Nepali filmmakers aiming for the global stage, it sparked hope and motivation to pursue their film dreams tirelessly.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

Can you tell us about your journey as a film writer/director in Nepal? What inspired you to pursue a career in filmmaking?

Abinash Bikram Shah

I've been interested in filmmaking for as long as I can remember. The question of what inspired me to embark on a career in this field is always complex. But it could be said that the films themselves were the source of my inspiration.

There is a saying that resonates with my journey: learning to swim demands diving into the water. There is no other way. Self growth is directly connected with the degree of drive, motivation and sincerity with which interests are pursued and managed. While I lack formal education in filmmaking, my education has come from the countless hours spent watching films – often the same one repeatedly – and immersing myself in the intricacies of their narratives. Writing screenplays for these films has also been instrumental in my learning process.

Also, deep within, I identify as an inherently shy individual. Interacting with others has consistently posed a challenge for me. However, I discovered that the art of writing stories and scripts has served as a remarkable means to triumph over this obstacle. Through my writing, I have found a powerful avenue for communication.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

As a writer/director, what is the extent of your personal life's influence on your direction? How do you draw the lines? When you revisit those dark chapters of your life that you've now directed, how do you cope with them?

Abinash Bikram Shah

The impact of an artist's personal life on their work is undeniable. Sometimes, this influence is overt and direct, while other times, it resides subtly, just beneath the surface. It might seep into the narrative or linger in the background. Hence, my own life experiences undeniably leave an imprint on my artistic endeavors, although the extent of that effect varies from project to project.

Abinash Bikram Shah

The notion that channeling intense emotion into art can be a cathartic experience is a common belief. However, this isn't always the case. While it can aid in the healing process and provide clarity upon revisiting the work, there are instances when the art becomes a constant reminder of challenging chapters that continue to impact us. Coping with such situations requires a delicate balance of introspection and self-care.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

As a producer, how much should I worry if the director wants to portray his/her truth on politics or cultural issues? In a socio-politically fragile and sensitive society, how would you convince your partner?

Abinash Bikram Shah

It's crucial for the director and producer to agree on how socio-political and cultural themes are shown in the film. When they don't agree, making the film that they both want becomes very difficult. Convincing someone to understand your social and political viewpoint is like handling personal relationships, completely depending upon the temperaments of the parties involved.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

As a filmmaker, what themes or stories do you prioritize in your films, and why?

Abinash Bikram Shah

A recurring emphasis in my work has been narratives concerning the lives of those who are marginalized and broken - individuals frequently neglected or overlooked by society due to arbitrary norms. These stark portrayals of reality might be bitter, yet they hold a profound significance for me. It's within these painful stories that I unearth my inspiration.

Through my films, I aspire to shed light on the struggles and injustices that these individuals face, aiming to evoke empathy and provoke some thought about the world we inhabit. My short film Lori focused on how patriarchy can be deeply rooted in our folk traditions and thus disproportionately affect younger girls, while my upcoming feature *Elephants in the Fog* explores the marginalization of trans women in Nepal.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

What do you think of the current state of the Nepalese film industry, and the recent changes that have taken place? What initiatives do you suggest to promote its growth both locally and internationally?

Abinash Bikram Shah

The Nepali film industry has expanded significantly compared to its recent past, making progress in both financial aspects and creative aspects. Some movies have attracted large audiences to theaters, contributing significantly to the industry's economic growth. Additionally, certain films have gained global recognition, introducing the industry to international viewers. These different yet complementary strategies have greatly benefited the sector.

To continue this growth, several initiatives could be considered, such as: investment in infrastructure, training and skill development, diversity in storytelling, international collaboration, holding film festivals of international standards, government support both financially and on the policy level, digital platforms, promotion and marketing at international film festivals. These initiatives collectively have the potential to position Nepalese cinema on a global stage while preserving its cultural authenticity.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

Are there any specific challenges that filmmakers in Nepal face compared to other countries? If so, how do you navigate those challenges?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Absolutely, filmmakers in Nepal do face unique challenges in comparison to their counterparts in other countries. There are two significant challenges that stand out.

First is a lack of sufficient funding. The Nepali film industry struggles with inadequate funding from both governmental and private sources, particularly for art films or projects that deviate from commercial norms. While there have been some efforts to address this issue, such as limited financial support from the film board, these measures often fall short of meeting the needs of many aspiring filmmakers and the potential projects that could contribute to a transformative shift in Nepali cinema.

The other challenge is limited script development resources. Developing high-quality scripts is a crucial aspect of filmmaking, and in Nepal, there's a dearth of skilled script consultants or residencies dedicated to nurturing scriptwriting talent. Additionally, the availability of development funding is almost null. Till now, the only option for filmmakers like us is to rely on international film festivals which are very competitive.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

Could you share some insights into the role of Nepali cinema in preserving and promoting the country's environment, culture and heritage?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Culture thrives in people's real experiences, communities, shared ideas, beats of music, and the subtleties of language and feelings. Just like other art forms that come from personal experiences tied to culture and surroundings, cinema naturally reflects these elements.

As cinema is a widely accessible and powerful art form, Nepali cinema has somewhat tapped into its advantages and potential. It achieves this by depicting local stories, diving into complex discussions about social and political issues, and through the impact of music and conversations. In a country rapidly being influenced by globalization and political shifts, Nepali cinema can serve as a potential medium. It can not only preserve what's disappearing but also explore and shape the promotion of culture and heritage for the future.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

How do you see the influence of international cinema on Nepali filmmakers?

Abinash Bikram Shah

In our connected world, it's tough to avoid being influenced by other creators, especially in the film industry. Cinema evolves as new filmmakers build on what came before them. Nepali filmmakers are no different - we've learned from global cinema, from Asia to Europe, North and South America. This learning has been essential for many of us to understand the technical parts of filmmaking. The degree of influence varies among filmmakers.

There was a time when these outside influences felt overwhelming, and Nepali filmmakers worried about losing their originality. But recently, it seems we're starting to stand out more. We're finding our own unique voice in world cinema, stepping away from being overly influenced by others.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

What advice would you give to aspiring Nepali filmmakers who are just starting their journey in the industry?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Having also worked as an educator for the last decade, I find up-and-coming filmmaking students to be fascinated with a certain style and certain creative voices from the get-go. While it is great to be aware of the kind of story you want to tell from the very start, I advise emerging filmmakers to not limit themselves within those stories. Explore beyond. Understand the power a screenplay holds. Read a lot of books. Watch a lot of films. Observe people and the nuances of humanity. Seek diverse perspectives, understand the other side of the story, explore the other dimension that makes a person whole.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

How does the film community in Nepal foster support for emerging directors and producers? How do they maintain strong collaboration within the film community?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Due to the small size of the Nepali film industry, there exists a robust culture of collaboration among filmmakers. This has significantly contributed to the industry's recent advancements. Filmmakers share ideas in confidence, offer feedback, and offer support to one another. My contribution to films like *Highway* (2012) and *Black Hen* (2015) happened only because of the exchange of support and collaboration carved over the years prior to those movies. By maintaining this interpersonal dynamic even with up-and-coming filmmakers, the industry's strengths will only grow further.

Prabin Kumar Rawat

How do emerging Nepali directors discover and develop their unique artistic voices?

Abinash Bikram Shah

Developing your artistic style/voice takes time and can't be rushed. It's shaped by the things you love and the influences around you. Nepali filmmakers starting out should focus on working consistently and with purpose. Pay attention to what you like, the stories you connect with, and what brings you joy.

Yet, avoid sticking to just one way of creating. If you only focus on one approach, story, or creator, you might unintentionally copy them. While it's okay to learn by imitating, it's also important to explore different influences. Instead of just sticking to one style or story, try different creative paths. This will help you learn from others while creating a unique blend of inspiration, and in the process, helps you come up with a voice that's unique to you.

by **Prabin Kumar Rawat** (prabinrawat@gmail.com) started his career as a production manager and line producer in films, TVC, and documentaries while still pursuing his film studies in Nepal. Since then, he has co-founded Cryptid Films and produced short films, uncovering hidden narratives from unexplored realms within Nepali society, environmental challenges and the urgent need for sustainability. He produced *A Year* (Telluride 2017) by Jisun Jamie Lee, *Black Goat* (Austin 2019) by Tang Yi, *Yet Another Winter* (Busan 2021), *Wheels On The Bus* (Berlinale 2023) and as a line producer, *Lori*, which won a special mention award in the short film competition at Cannes 2023. *Kalam*, the first short film he directed, premiered in Busan IFF 2019. Prabin is an alumnus of the Asian Producer Network at SGIFF 2023. Currently, he is developing his feature film *Messengers of the Gods* at Busan Asian Film School (AFIS).

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals





SERAJ US SALIKIN

Screenwriter / Director

Pakistan

Interview by Rahul AIJAZ



Seraj us Salikin is a writer and director based in Karachi, Pakistan. With over nine years experience in filmmaking, he has made multiple award-winning short films and documentaries such as *Taqseem* and *Masters of the Sky*. In 2023, he released his directorial debut feature film *Madaari* (The Monkey Dance).

Madaari is a 2023 Pakistani film directed by Seraj us Salikin and co-written by Ali Rizvi and Salikin. It stars Ibad Alam Sher, Paras Masroor and Hammad Siddiq. The film, set in 2008, revolves around a young, working-class man Haris whose father is brutally murdered during a political rift. Once fate leads him to work in his father's killer's office, Haris must choose between revenge or a better life.



Rahul Aijaz

You have been working as a filmmaker for many years. How did it all begin?

Seraj us Salikin

So my filmmaking career started during my academic years. I graduated from SZABIST Media Science department in 2014. In 2013, when I was in my third year, my short documentary *Masters of the Sky* was selected in the Cannes Short Film Corner. And that's when I felt that my calling is filmmaking. After that, I started working in the TVC industry. After a year or so, I went for my masters in Arts and Culture Management at the Rome Business School in Italy.

That was also the time for me to get away from all the hustle and bustle and focus on writing. I began writing lots of scripts when I was studying abroad. When I came back, I was pursuing the goal of making my debut feature length film. I was working as a freelance writer, director and editor. Most of the time, I was writing and directing. I continued trying to get financing for my feature film since 2017 or 2018. Then in 2019, I was able to get my film *Madaari* off the ground and we started this journey. And we finally released *Madaari* in the summer of 2023.

Rahul Aijaz

Which filmmakers or artists (from any art form) have inspired you and your filmmaking style?

Seraj us Salikin

In 2010, when I started studying film, I was getting to know filmmaking is. In my second semester, I watched *Taxi Driver*. That's when I was blown away about how films can be made. I wasn't aware of these kind of films outside the subcontinent. That was an eye-opener for me. I started to research and got to know about film history and movements. It piqued my interest and I was learning about wonderful directors and the art of storytelling.

Initially when you're not that equipped and you're starting out, inspiration is very important at that stage. You look at films that move and inspire you. You try to create something as wonderful as what you see. Some of the films that've been etched in my mind are by Martin Scorsese, Charlie Kaufman, Asghar Farhadi, Majid Majidi, Ingmar Bergmann, Dibakar Banerjee, Anurag Kashyap and Bong Joon Ho.

Rahul Aijaz

What sparks your ideas when writing a film? How do you decide what to write a film about?

Seraj us Salikin

I always think that as a writer-director, every day you get multiple ideas and you're very keen to write about all of them. But there are some ideas that stay with you. These are the ideas you really want to talk about. *Madaari* was one of those ideas.

It started with a scene that is very crucial in the first act. I had this character of Haris in my mind and I wanted to make this film. I was sure I could make a great story. It's a powerful scene where Haris is protesting, and he has this animalistic instinct of protesting like a wild gorilla. I had the character so clear in my mind that I was able to create the world around him. It was like the character was telling me what he wants to do, and how he wants to live in this world. It was a thorough and long process. I wasn't ready to force ideas so it took time. The most important thing was to keep the story fresh. And it should make me feel that I was doing something worthy. Because of that, it went really well. I was satisfied with it as my first feature film.

Rahul Aijaz

What made you want to make a politically-charged crime thriller like Madari? And what is the film exploring at its heart?

Seraj us Salikin

Madaari is a revenge story talking about a dilemma of a common man. It looks at what a common man is in for in this corrupt justice system in a third world country. That's the basic premise.

But when you look at the story, it's about a lot more. It's about a young innocent person, whose father was killed in a political rift. And the political situation is volatile in Pakistan. The young blood who join political parties end up destroying themselves and their families. And big leaders exploit it. That's what *Madaari* is about in essence: it's exploring how a young man could achieve justice for himself. If he's supporting a party, what are the basic rights that are provided to him? And how does the justice system serve a common man differently as compared to the powerful?

I'm always trying to learn more about the craft, especially writing. Because when you get to a point where you understand structure and rules, you discover how amazing films can be when they break those rules, and they meander around those structures to create something magical. That was my goal when I started writing *Madaari*. I wanted to create a world, a setting where the audience would see the real Karachi, the political games and chaotic situations that a common man goes through. I was trying to understand what it's like for a common man in this world where there's all this corruption and crime. I was sure we hadn't seen Karachi through that lens, so it was a good opportunity for me to step into this area and try to execute a realistic, gritty and meaningful film.

Rahul Aijaz

Could you share the overall process behind the making of Madaari?

Seraj us Salikin

The process was all about patience, persistence and passion. The three P's were what got *Madaari* made. When I started to approach the actors, when we were auditioning them, whenever I was narrating the story to them or my co-producers or friends, it got a positive response. It reaffirmed my belief that the project was something worth doing. The casting process was spot on. We got the perfect Haris and I believe no one could do it better than Ibad Alam Sher.

It's been a long process of four-plus years to complete the film, because *Madaari* has been completely independently made and self-financed by me and two of my co-producers, Ali Rizvi and Ammar Ali Danish. It's a one-of-a-kind journey in Pakistan where such stories and non-commercial films are not entertained or supported in the industry. Getting it made and getting it into theaters is one of the greatest achievements for all of us.

Rahul Aijaz

What were the biggest challenges you faced in making Madaari?

Seraj us Salikin

It took us over four years to make the film. We crowd-funded as well as invested our own money. And we shot it in two spells. Between the two spells, we also faced a hiatus due to COVID-19, which was one of the big challenges for us. There was a whole year of complete isolation. It was tough because it was up to us to decide whether to push through or let the project go. And I'm thankful that we didn't let go of it. My actors had trust in me and

Seraj us Salikin

the narrative, so they also wanted to complete the film. We patiently waited, and used the year to save some more money for the second spell, which was bigger than the first one.

Another big challenge was the financial one. And we thought that getting through the production phase would make things easier for us. But then we realized that distribution is a huge challenge in itself, in a market where such films are not entertained. There is no parallel cinema, no avenues, no cinemas, production houses or channels which would look into such narratives. The TV networks tend to look away from political subjects, especially when it's realistic or doesn't have a star cast or big Bollywood-inspired song-and-dance routines.

So, it was a big challenge to market, sell and distribute it, which we didn't want to think about earlier. We were focused on making the film first, because if there's no film, there's nothing to distribute. But after we got the first step done, we realized it's a huge task to get the film out there.

Rahul Aijaz

You not only wrote, directed and produced Madaari, but also distributed it. How did you decide to take on distribution yourself?

Seraj us Salikin

We went to a lot of distributors. There are three major distributors in the country and a few smaller ones. We went to all of them and they were not interested because we had no star cast. They didn't even bother to watch the film. But we persisted and showed the film to two major distributors. They liked the film and gave us great reviews, but they weren't willing to distribute it because they said it wasn't sellable in the Pakistani market since the masses want big stars, dance numbers and commercial value. They wanted us to pay them to distribute it. And I wasn't very fond of this idea.

I decided that if we had produced it ourselves, then we can take up distribution as a learning process as well. So we decided to distribute *Madaari* ourselves. Venturing into the distribution phase, I must say that some of the distributors were very helpful in making us aware of the step-by-step process in order to get the film to the big screen. Nadeem Mandiwalla (exhibitor, distributor and film producer) truly helped and supported us in the process.

Distributing *Madaari* all over Pakistan taught me a lot of things. It helped me get to know about the film market and how to be successful in this kind of niche market. I learned what factors could increase your chances of creating a financially successful model for the film. As a film producer, it's not just about making a great film. It's also about making box office collections so that you earn enough to make your next film. And so the distribution process is still not over. *Madaari* is currently in the OTT phase. We are getting offers from multiple OTT platforms and trying to find the best possible option for us. An OTT platform would be good for us to reach out to the international audience who might be interested in our film.

Rahul Aijaz

It seems that Pakistani distributors and exhibitors are hesitant when it comes to working with independent filmmakers. What did you think of their reaction when dealing with them? And what did going through this process tell you about the Pakistani film industry?

Seraj us Salikin

Pakistan, one of the most populous countries in the world with around 250 million population, has hardly 60 to 70 cinemas with about 125 screens. It's nothing. So how can a filmmaker thrive? How can a film producer thrive when you have such low numbers? That has also diminished the cinema-going culture. It didn't happen overnight. This downfall has been in motion for decades.

So, when you see the situation, you can't really blame the distributors and exhibitors because they have nothing. They have to make money to survive with such limited films and screens. It's a miracle that the industry is still functioning. So, obviously, the distribution process thus becomes more difficult for newcomers and independent films. They don't get many avenues to get their film out there, or have enough money to market it.

Most of the distributors will definitely go for formulaic films because they don't want to risk it. And rightly so, because how can they support an independent filmmaker when their own industry is on the rocks? So, I feel that you can't blame individuals. It's the infrastructure, the skeleton of the industry, it's a weak foundation that you cannot really point fingers at and say this specific department is where the fault lies. The fault is that there are no avenues, no foundation, no structure. There are no roots to this tree that's leaning and almost at the point of falling.

Rahul Aijaz

Do you think it was the right option to self-distribute your debut feature? Or would it have benefitted from a different strategy?

Seraj us Salikin

Objectively, most people would think you need a big distributor for a film to survive in the market. However, I feel this is not the case. Self-distribution was a better way for us to learn about how the Pakistani film industry works, and how the film gets to the cinema screens. For us, it was a very good learning process. We got to know how independent films are seen by the distributors and exhibitors as well as the audience.

Rahul Aijaz

How was the response of the audience to the film?

Seraj us Salikin

Madaari got the best reviews from film critics who loved the performances and the direction. We were very happy to be critically acclaimed compared to the bigger commercial films that were released at the same time on Eid holidays. It was satisfying to see that, because we were hoping for it based on our hard work. It finally paid off.

Rahul Aijaz

What were some of the biggest things you learned while making and releasing the film?

Seraj us Salikin

We learned that many cinema-owners didn't play our trailers on the digital screens, which they were supposed to according to the contracts. They were promoting other films, and we weren't able to get proper recognition in the marketing by the exhibitors. This was especially the case in Punjab, where a lot of films aren't promoted if they are in Urdu language. They naturally have a very Punjab-oriented audience and they focus more on comedies and rom-coms rather than parallel cinema. We faced that situation, but no matter how damaging it was to our film, we could also understand their point of view. Nonetheless, it was a good process of learning about the industry, promoting our film and reaching out to the right audience.

Seraj us Salikin

We didn't get many screens but wherever we did, people went and they praised the film and promoted it on social media. That led *Madaari* to be screened in the theaters for two weeks, which was a huge achievement for us. Even in the face of competition from big commercial films from giant production houses and distributors, we stayed for two weeks, especially in Karachi and across the rest of the Sindh province.

In Punjab, many exhibitors didn't release *Madaari* even though there was considerable audience interest. People kept asking us when they would get to see the film in Multan, Sialkot, Faisalabad and all the way to Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. We also realized during our journey that single-screen cinemas only focus on masala commercial movies, and they weren't willing to give their time to independent films without a star cast. It was understandable because it made me realize what I should do next.

If I want to make a commercially-viable film, there are certain factors I need to keep in mind. If I'm making a film using somebody else's money, I have to ensure he gets his return. Otherwise, he won't make a next film. And there's no point in damaging the financier and the industry. I can do films I want to do with my own money. But if I'm making a film for the masses, the local market, I need to keep them in mind and put the right ingredients for them so that it pays off for the producer.

Rahul Aijaz

Could you talk about the independent filmmaking landscape in Pakistan? We have seen some interesting films come out lately and it seems like a new breed of Pakistani filmmakers are finding their voice and slowly giving the national cinema a new identity. What are your thoughts on being a part of this much-needed change? Will this change continue?

Seraj us Salikin

Independent filmmaking in Pakistan is like going on a never-ending war. But there's no way you look back, if you want to succeed. Just look forward and work your way through it. When you look back, you see other filmmakers who followed that path. And you realize that there are other voices who want the world to hear them, that's where the change starts. You feel it coming and it could help you develop your independent filmmakers' community. And this is how your voices will be heard. And it's not something new. Film movements have happened across the world. This is how new genres and new filmmaking paths are introduced and this is how the taste of the audience changes as well.

You don't have to look 1000 miles away. Just look at Iranian cinema. In India, look at the work of Anurag Kashyap, Neeraj Ghaywan. The evolution from the parallel cinema all the way to the web series India has been producing today - the foundations are there. It started with films like *Satya*, *Parinda*, *Shool* and then later *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Now you can see all those creators have changed the face of the industry. They made an identity for themselves.

If Pakistani filmmakers are honest and dedicated to their work, they can give this identity to Pakistani cinema as well. And despite the limited resources and next-to-none financial models, it's still achievable. This is the beauty of independent filmmakers that it's not just about the budget for them ever. It's about the idea and the hunger to get it out there.

Rahul Aijaz

How does the infrastructure, or lack thereof, support or hinder this change?

Rahul Aijaz

And what's needed to accelerate it?

Seraj us Salikin

We need a lot of government support. Because it's an industry and not about certain individuals. For the cinema to survive and improve, we desperately need the government's support and funding to build a strong foundation and then let the creative voices do their work. In the last decade, we have seen a spark, individual efforts, but not a collective effort that could uplift the industry. And this is where the government support is needed.

Rahul Aijaz

How often do Pakistani indie filmmakers turn to foreign funding and grants to realize their projects? And do you think we should be looking at international co-productions to do that?

Seraj us Salikin

Considering the political turmoil and everything that's happening in Pakistan, there are many filmmakers that have moved out of the country and are looking for better opportunities abroad. They are looking for foreign funds and grants to get their projects done because the Pakistan government is not able to secure the filmmakers' futures, and isn't able to support the infrastructure of the industry. So, I believe, it's a fair thing for an independent filmmaker to do because if he has to tell stories, and if he's getting coproduction support or any other avenue, it's very good. That is a good exchange of art and culture, and collaboration between different production houses and platforms is always healthy. This crossover is beneficial for the cinema industry for all countries involved in any given project. Pakistani indie filmmakers pursue that option and it also gives them a better opportunity to market their films overseas. It's a positive thing for independent filmmakers because their voices are being heard in the international circuit.

Currently, I'm also working on an international collaboration, an Indian web series. It's a great collaboration between Pakistan and India, and a great opportunity for me to be working as a director in this project. It's been a wonderful experience working with them, learning from them. International experience brings a lot of new learning, a lot of exposure and connections, getting to know their work, conversations about creativity and the workings of the industry. It's a fulfilling experience.

Rahul Aijaz

We always compare ourselves to Indian film industry. Do you think that's a fair comparison to begin with?

Seraj us Salikin

Working with Indian actors and the team, I realized that they are also very fond of Pakistani dramas, like we are fond of Bollywood films. But comparing the two industries is, of course, not fair. It's a huge and very old industry. Bollywood is a global phenomenon. But Pakistan doesn't have any of that. But they love the stories and actors we have.

The most important thing is the love for art. Indians are not hesitant to express that when they meet you. And neither are Pakistanis hesitant about praising Indian films and music. And this cross-cultural exchange tells you that it's not about the budget or the size of the industry. At its core, it's about the beauty of storytelling. If you can tell a good story, people across the world will appreciate it.

If you talk about industry growth, Pakistan has a long way to go. And we do need support

Seraj us Salikin

from multiple avenues. We need government support to take it to a stage where, let's say, Korean or Indian cinema is today. For the Pakistani industry to achieve that, it'd take at least a decade or more. To get there, they need consistent films and we only make 25-30 films annually, which is nothing. We need at least 100 films for us to be called a cinema industry.

Rahul Aijaz

Lastly, what do the stakeholders in the Pakistani film industry need to do if we want to change and improve the industry?

Seraj us Salikin

I think we need some daring producers and investors, who want to give Pakistan its original cinematic voice. Producers are like the fuel to a car engine. And we need that fuel to keep the industry going. We have a lot of talented filmmakers, but it's the financial opportunities that the country lacks. If that is taken care of, the Pakistani film industry will be blooming. I have no doubt about it. But it's going to take a lot of time and patience.

by **Rahul Aijaz (aijazrahul@gmail.com)** is a writer, director and producer based in Pakistan. He mainly works in his mother tongue Sindhi language and has produced multiple short films including 'A Train Crosses the Desert', the first Sindhi language short film from Pakistan to screen internationally. His debut feature 'Indus Echoes', the first Sindhi feature film from Pakistan of the last 27 years and the first ever Korea-Pakistan co-production, is currently in post-production. He's currently developing his second feature film 'The Last Ajrak Maker'.

Aijaz graduated from International Film Business Academy, a fellowship program at the Busan Asian Film School in 2023, and was part of the Asian Producers Network at the Singapore International Film Festival (2023). He has completed several film and screenwriting fellowships such as Goethe-Institute Pakistan's Episodic TV Writing workshops (2022-2023) and Film Talents II (2019-2021), Screenwriting Workshops by Locarno Open Doors and Vidhi Films, LBF Virtual Museum (2022) by Lahore Biennale Foundation and British Council Pakistan, and more.

He teaches Film History and Distribution & Promotion at the Institute of Business Management (IoBM), Karachi. In 2021, he founded Film N' Chips Media Productions, under the banner of which he now produces short and feature films.

Previously, he worked as a journalist and film critic between Pakistan and South Korea and has written over 900 articles covering cinema, music, theater, pro-wrestling and creative industries published across Pakistan, Korea, USA, Malaysia and India.



DOLLY DE LEON

Actor

Philippines

Interview by Kristine DE LEON



Dolly De Leon was born and raised in Manila. She completed a BA in theater arts at the University of the Philippines, and won praise for her performances in stage productions of Shakespeare, Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. Later taking up work in film, she won Best Supporting Actress from the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) for her role in the 2019 film *Verdict* by Raymund Ribay Gutierrez. She also worked with director Lav Diaz in *Historya ni Ha* (2021) and took a starring role for director Erik Matti in the HBO anthology series *Folklore* (2021). De Leon is best known for playing Abigail in Ruben Östlund's Palme d'Or-winning *Triangle of Sadness*, a role which netted her Best Supporting Actress nominations at the BAFTAs and Golden Globes. In 2023 she was invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Kristine De Leon

*Hello, Miss Dolly. I'm Kristine De Leon, an emerging producer being mentored by Alemberg Ang. A funny story before we start... When I was in Cannes developing a feature film, my first as a producer, people kept asking me about Dolly De Leon, assuming we had a connection due to our last names. The pressure was there. Once, during a discussion about *Triangle of Sadness*, they asked, "Oh, you're a De Leon?" I replied, "Have you watched my mom?" They really believed I was your daughter. It's a privilege. Even the Asian producers here say, "Oh my God, you're interviewing Dolly." First of all, thank you because I know you're very busy. Even on Facebook, I always see your posts.*

Dolly De Leon

Sorry, people might be getting tired of seeing my face. But I'm happy to help, especially for a fellow Filipino in a foreign country and an emerging filmmaker.

Kristine De Leon

Thank you. Ms. Dolly, my first question is, how did you start your profession as an actress in the Philippines? The acting profession is not initially self-sustaining. How did you begin?

Dolly De Leon

It started when I was in high school, doing commercials. I auditioned for commercials, did VTRs, and eventually appeared in about two commercials. However, I officially became a professional actor when I was in college at the University of the Philippines (UP). That's when I started doing sitcoms, teleseries, and a lot of theater. That's how I began my journey, it all started in school.

Kristine De Leon

That's it. It really started from passion. Why did you choose this profession, and what's the main reason you keep choosing it?

Dolly De Leon

I think the reason I chose it is that it chose me. In grade school, our teacher assigned us to perform a skit at school. It was a scene where our classmate, playing my mother, would die. As our classmates watched, my siblings and I, in the scene, started pretending to cry. Before I knew it, I was crying for real. It felt good because at home, we were not allowed to cry. When I cried at home, my mom would say, "Don't cry, don't cry." That's what she always told us. So, when I cried during the skit, it felt like a release, like I found an outlet. At that time, I didn't know acting could be a profession. When I went to UP and did theater, it sealed the deal for me. I realized this is what I want to do, and it can be a profession.

Kristine De Leon

Did you experience discrimination as a woman in the industry?

Dolly De Leon

Yes, especially during my time. Discrimination was more prevalent then. In the theater, though, I didn't feel it. Women were given more respect and opportunities. Directors never made us feel lesser because we were women. In fact, they capitalized on the fact that we were women.

We are people to be reckoned with because of our gender. In the industry, there were attitudes like if you wear a mini-skirt, you're cheap. Those kinds of things. It's not just in the industry; it's with people in general. If you go out drinking with men, you're asking for it. That was very common during my time. But with me, I didn't really care about that. I didn't care if people called me names because I was drinking with boys. But when it came to clothing, I was affected. I became conscious of what to wear, not too revealing, no spaghetti straps, or I might look cheap. It was prevalent when I was young, especially as a teenager.

Kristine De Leon *It's still happening now. That's why we still need to address it. We're getting there, but being a woman still puts you in a marginalized position.*

Dolly De Leon Yes, exactly. It's weird because I don't really think that way. My mindset doesn't operate in such a limited manner. I don't see the world as small-minded. I don't know why. To me, we're just people. Our gender is merely a coincidence. People attach labels to that. When they do, I'm surprised. For example, your question, did I experience it? No, because I don't think that way.

Kristine De Leon *That's a good point and perspective. Okay, next question. Something groundbreaking happened with Triangle of Sadness in our industry, especially for actors. Can you share the process of your involvement?*

Dolly De Leon The filmmakers flew to the Philippines and held auditions because they wanted a Filipina for the role of Abigail. They got in touch with local producers like Bianca Balbuena and Jake Makapagal, asking for help. Around 40 women, including me, auditioned. The director, Ruben Östlund, couldn't come, so his casting director recorded our scenes and sent them to him. He selected five of us, talked to each one individually, and then decided who would play the role.

Kristine De Leon *Amazing, Ms. Dolly. You're incredible. It's not flattery, it's true. How was the experience working with people from different nationalities?*

Dolly De Leon It was the best experience for me. It was my first time working with other nationalities, and not just any, but a diverse group—German, Russian, British, American, South African, Norwegian, Swedish, French. Despite our different backgrounds and cultures, we gelled because we shared a passion for acting. *Triangle* remains my best filming experience.

Kristine De Leon *That's beautiful. I'm also studying and specializing in international co-productions. Do you encourage working with different countries in this way, and why?*

Dolly De Leon Yes, I definitely do because aside from the fact that we learn from their best practices, each country has its own strengths. Even though I've said this so many times, the working conditions in other countries are better than in the Philippines, but Philippine production has its own strengths. Besides that, you're also building the economy of the country you're co-producing the film with, right? You're contributing to the economy. I know that as artists, we just think that we're creating, that this is an expression, but for me, it impacts the whole world. We impact the world in terms of culture, belief systems, and the economy. The economy thrives because of the film industry, right? In all aspects, in food, in retail, in everything. It's such a huge industry that would be even more meaningful and would flourish even more if we're co-producing with other countries or if we're filming in other countries. We also boost their economy.

So yes, and I've actually done that three times, working with different international productions. The first was with *Untrue*, a film by Sigrid Bernardo that was shot in the country of Georgia, co-produced by Georgian producers, and with a Georgian crew. So I also experienced how they work. And then there was the film *Walang Ka-Paris* that we shot in France. So again, I was exposed to a different culture in working with a Parisian

Dolly De Leon team. So yes, it's enjoyable to do it that way.

Kristine De Leon *Recently I watched your Cinemalaya speech because we also had a short film this year. It was your first time receiving a local award, and I was surprised by that. How was the feeling?*

Dolly De Leon I was overwhelmed that night. I really didn't expect to win, so I wasn't prepared. I was nervous. I said it was my first time to receive an award, but I have received awards in the Philippines before. It was just my first time stepping on stage to receive an award and give a speech. When I won in 2020, during the pandemic, they just delivered the award to my house. They sent me an email.

It feels so good because, first of all, it's Cinemalaya. I have a very high regard for Cinemalaya because they have really opened doors for young filmmakers who are looking for a platform where they can showcase their talent. So I'm really proud that they recognized me and my work. It was a different kind of excitement, a different kind of joy.

Kristine De Leon *Congratulations on that. For my next question, I saw that you supported the Eddie Garcia Bill in the Senate. So relating to that, what do you hope for the Filipino film industry in the future? [Note: Senate Bill (S.B.) No. 1889 ensures that entertainment industry workers are provided opportunities for gainful employment and decent income, and are protected from abuse, harassment, hazardous working conditions, and economic exploitation.]*

Dolly De Leon I sincerely hope that the rights of our laborers will be honored, and they will be granted all the privileges they deserve. And I'm not just referring to actors; I mean our entire crew—the gaffer, the dolly grip, utilities, wardrobe, everybody. While I represent AKTOR, the League of Filipino Actors, at the end of the day we're advocating for the entire industry. It's crucial that we practice labor in a way that respects the worker, prioritizing safety and health.

Unfortunately, Kristine, many in our industry have lost their lives due to these issues. We've had directors who passed away because of the lack of support. They aren't getting the help they need, leading to heart attacks and similar tragedies. This must change. It really has to change. What's the point of having a Department of Labor and Employment if they're not protecting us? However, I can't entirely blame the Department of Labor and Employment because there are laws in place. The problem is that producers often use the film industry as an excuse, claiming that filming is different and cannot be compared to regular employment. They manipulate the rules in that way. This is why we had to push for the Eddie Garcia bill, so it can become law, ensuring that all our rights as laborers are honored and respected.

Kristine De Leon *Yes, I also feel that as an emerging producer, we should adhere to these kind of working conditions. Actually, it's our responsibility.*

Dolly De Leon Yes, but I also understand your perspective because, of course, you will incur losses if the work is limited to 8 hours. That's why we agreed even to 12 hours, which is really above and beyond the time required for a person to work per day. But we made the agreement: just don't extend it to 20 hours or 23 hours; that's truly inhumane.

Dolly De Leon And then there's the issue of turnaround time. The producers might be thinking they can save time if the crew sleeps for a short period, allowing for an early call time the next day. However, it's tough on the crew because, in reality, they only get 6 hours of rest, and they don't deserve that. The thing with our crew is, they will accept it. Even if you ask them, they will just say it's okay because they need to work, and they're afraid they might not be hired again. So there's another factor at play here — I call it bullying. It's a power play, knowing they will give in.

Kristine De Leon *Absolutely. It's a delicate balance, but it's necessary. I think a person's character is reflected in how she deals with people in lower positions.*

Dolly De Leon Yes, exactly. My benchmark for that is, if I'm hanging out with a newfound friend and he or she is very kind to me, but when the waiter arrives, he or she is rude to the waiter, I'll soon realize that he or she is not a good person, right?

Kristine De Leon *Yes, that's really beautiful, Ms. Dolly. Okay, here's something I often ask when people are drunk at parties. What is your end goal as an artist?*

Dolly De Leon My end goal as an artist... honestly, this will sound very ambitious, Kristine. And I may come across as extremely confident when I say this, but it's just a desire, right? I'm not saying I can do it, but I'm really hoping that I'll change the landscape of acting in the Philippines. Because the way we act sometimes in the Philippines, it's obvious that the lines are memorized, and the delivery becomes sing-song, using a speech pattern that isn't natural. I'm hoping that through my style of acting, others will follow suit and see that it's really a more moving way of telling a story. It's coming from the truth, rather than trying to impress people saying, "I'm a good actress." No, it's not about that. It's about honoring and servicing the character and telling their story and their truth, with them in mind. What would they think if I'm performing? What would Abigail, the real Abigail, think if I portrayed her this way? I want to make her proud and to say, "Yes, she told my story so well that I can really see myself in her." That's what I want, hopefully. Because, you know, in old Hollywood, for example, in the thirties or forties... I don't know if you watch old Hollywood films.

Kristine De Leon *Yes, we've watched them here.*

Dolly De Leon Isn't their acting there very different? It's very different compared to how Hollywood actors act today, a huge difference. So I'm hoping that we can surpass the stage where we always need to look good, but not necessarily authentic.

Kristine De Leon *Yes, right?*

Dolly De Leon And the type that even if you came in from outside and it's windy, your hair is still in place. Come on, that doesn't even happen in real life.

Kristine De Leon *Even us producers and directors need to change our approach, because we're also in charge of those creative aspects. But Miss Dolly, you're already starting that process.*

Dolly De Leon Am I? Oh wow. Thank you.

Kristine De Leon *This is my last question. It's like we're in a TV interview, right? Do you have any inspirational message for upcoming filmmakers or artists?*

Dolly De Leon Right now, you're very idealistic, and you have a lot of dreams. The time will come when you will face people who will try to shatter those dreams. Don't let them. Keep reaching for the stars and dream up the impossible because nothing is truly impossible. Don't let anyone get in your way, no matter how frustrating it may be or how limited your resources are. Just keep fighting the good fight. Remember, it's all about humanity. So, at the end of the day, stay in touch with your most humane side and work with love and kindness, and you won't go wrong. You can't go wrong.

Kristine De Leon *Miss Dolly, I needed that. You're often presented with facts, like the numbers and all that stuff, explaining why producers are focused on the bottom line. However, I really needed this because it comes from that passion—your dream of telling the truth about our country. So, thank you. I needed to hear that, really.*

Dolly De Leon You're welcome. I'm happy to share that with you because someday you may end up working in a big corporation, or a really big studio. And then, you know how it goes, their main goal is the bottom line or money, right? And then, before you know it, that might become your goal too, just to make money because you've adopted that belief system. So don't let it be like that. Just remember that it's about humanity.

Kristine De Leon *Sorry, there's one more thing I want to ask for myself. Because filmmaking started as a passion for me. That's why I engage in other ads, to separate income generation from passion, because maybe my goals or vision for my art might change. So, Miss Dolly, how do you balance that? Business versus art.*

Dolly De Leon What I do is, I don't accept projects, even from big studios with a hefty paycheck, unless... Oh, this might sound like I'm coming from privilege, right? But I won't accept it unless the story has weight, the character resonates with me, and the message fills my soul as a creative person. As long as those elements are present, money and recognition are just bonuses. I'm not saying I totally turn down such projects. Recently, I did a film with a big company, and I received a good paycheck. It's going to be a very commercial film. But I did it because the story is important, the character is one I truly want to portray, and it's meaningful work. It's not empty, you know? It's not just something I did for the money. I did it because I believe in the project, and the story.

Regarding commercials, there was a time when I would take on any commercial that came my way, because I needed to make a living. However, if we put our heart and soul into it without focusing too much on the money, but rather on the art of it, putting our own input into it, and making it a very human experience, then it can be worth it.

Kristine De Leon *Yes, yes. I just want to say thank you. I'm very grateful, Mom.*

Dolly De Leon Of course, Daughter.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection :

Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals

by **Kristine De Leon** (kristinejadeleon@gmail.com), a Filipina producer, began her career at the Film Development Council of the Philippines, overseeing international co-production funds. She later ventured into producing her own films. Her portfolio includes Arvin Belarmino's feature film project *Ria*, developed at the 2023 Festival de Cannes La Résidence. The film received the CNC Pitch Award and further development through the Produire au Sud Workshop in Nantes and La Fabrique Cinéma de l'Institut Français during 2023 Festival de Cannes, where it won the Sorfond award. Kristine now embraces motherhood, cherishing her daughter as life's exquisite masterpiece.





HUANG JUNXIANG

Producer / Director

Singapore

Interview by Regina TEO



Huang Junxiang enjoys a good comedy and is grateful to be able to pursue a career in filmmaking. He has produced a number of feature films including *In The Room* (Toronto 2016), *Apprentice* (Un Certain Regard 2016), *Ramen Teh* (Berlin Culinary Cinema 2018), *Buffalo Boys* (Fantasia Film Festival 2018) and *Tiong Bahru Social Club* (Busan International Film Festival 2020). He has also served as producer for both the HBO Asia anthology series *Folklore* (2018) and *Food Lore* (2019) which has travelled to festivals including Toronto, Sitges and Fantastic Fest. His latest production, *In My Mother's Skin* (2023), premiered in Sundance and was acquired by Amazon Prime.

As a director, his short film, *Give Yourself a Chance*, was awarded at the Very Short International Festival 2012. His second, *I Will Die* screened at Singapore International Film Festival 2014. His most recent effort, *Piece of Meat* (2019), co-directed with Jerrold Chong, enjoyed its premiere at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes and subsequently travelled to Annecy and Busan. For his efforts, Huang Junxiang was awarded the Youth Inspiration Award at the Singaporean National Youth Film Awards in 2020.



Regina Teo

Could you begin by introducing yourself?

Huang Junxiang

I'm Huang Junxiang and I'm a film producer. I've been working in the industry for about 10 years. I was with Zhao Wei Films for 10 years and now I'm freelancing. I've done media across a variety of different platforms including TV, mainly for OTT platforms. I've also done feature films, and commissioned videos or what we call branded content for exhibitions, events, concerts and TV commercials as well. So that covers a range of things.

Regina Teo

How did you begin your journey as a filmmaker?

Huang Junxiang

I actually read law before I decided to do film. I started by watching films, then when I met a friend who had a camera, we started to shoot short films. I submitted one of them for a competition, and we won a few awards, and then I managed to translate that into an internship with Zhao Wei Films. I was there for 10 years after.

Regina Teo

Personally, my parents are not supportive of me being in the industry, because of how versatile and volatile it is. How did your parents take the news of your career switch?

Huang Junxiang

Obviously, not very well. I think till this day, there are a lot of concerns about whether being in this line of work is sustainable. I think there is a certain truth to that, especially since the cost of living in Singapore is very high. Our market is actually also very small, so it's not very friendly towards filmmaking as a career. But that being said, I think it's something you have to choose to do. My dad is still not very keen on it, to put it mildly. But I think my mom is pretty okay. I think mothers genuinely will say that as long as you have enough to eat, you can survive, and you're comfortable with your decisions, you will be fine.

Regina Teo

As you've mentioned sustainability; I believe there's always a struggle with how to earn money with the films that we want to make. What are your motivations in filmmaking then?

Huang Junxiang

First and foremost, the primary goal for me really is to be able to hone my craft, and to be able to find ways to tell the stories or what I feel through film. There's a technical aspect and of course, the storytelling aspect.

My secondary goal, being in Singapore, is to capture something that feels very authentic to our country. I was doing a video for our National Day Parade and felt quite cynical towards it. But one of the creative team put the work into a different perspective for me that made me appreciate the process, which is that you're actually creating a part of the visual history of how Singaporeans see themselves. And I think that is very relevant with regard to film. We are not just archiving, but we are also pioneering different ways to see ourselves and our current state of being, so that it isn't so myopic. I think that's important in every culture, especially in a young nation like Singapore.

Regina Teo

What are your thoughts on Singapore's film industry, and the audience's differing reception of commercial and indie films?

Huang Junxiang

There are different audiences for films, and there are different roles that each film plays. I think it is great that we have a lot of auteurs being groomed now, and our track record is probably punching above its weight in terms of the number of films made and the festivals we are getting into. In that aspect, it's going very well. But I think that in a way we have neglected the other spectrum of what films can be, and who they speak to, which is a domestic audience.

Auteur theory is a little bit damaging to this, because we should also listen to audiences and try to create things for them. But Singapore is obviously a very tricky proposition here, because we are not a linguistically homogeneous society. We have a different set of challenges. That's why many filmmakers are looking to do projects that will travel abroad. Anthony Chen and Eric Khoo are good examples of filmmakers who have done films which have foreign key markets, same with Kirsten doing her film in Thailand, even with He Shuming on *AJOOMMA* (2023). By virtue of us being a small market, our filmmakers are learning how to become a bit more global in their reach, their approach and their thought process. And I think there are certain advantages to that. In terms of critical mass, for domestic appreciation, I think that will be something that will happen more and more as the diversity of filmmakers grows. But I think, with strong policy making, that will develop naturally. It's just a question of when, how and who as well.

Regina Teo

What are your opinions on the increase in co-production with regional and global partners?

Huang Junxiang

Here's where I'm very conflicted. On one hand I've done a fair number of co-productions which I think are great. I think they are great for our local producers, to help them understand the world and how things are done differently in other countries. But also, many local producers are doing co-productions because it's kind of easier than tackling the main problem. Co-productions are a financing model that panders to a certain brand of filmmaking which often neglects the growth of a domestic audience. Also, to be very critical and harsh, I'm wondering where the room is for us to groom a wider range of talents (cast and crew) to work with foreign partners. The real challenge is in trying to seed it in. Craft-wise, the learning needs to be a lot more considered and effective for it to benefit domestically. Otherwise, I don't know whether the cost benefit is worthwhile or not. But it's great for producers, no doubt.

Regina Teo

As a producer, what do you look for when choosing your projects?

Huang Junxiang

For me, the stories that I really want to tell are the ones that more people may want to see, and need to see. There has to always be a market angle for me when I pick a film. To be fair, a lot of local producers occupy the niche of picking films that are very auteur-driven, which is less market facing. But for me, I like to pick projects with a market angle, which means maybe films with a little bit of genre, or something with a strong topical element to it.

Like for Jack Neo, he chooses topics which people want to begin a conversation about. In this regard, I see his films like campfires that draw people to a certain conversation that they want to talk about, or want to understand. For example, he has covered national service, the economy and education. These are the three things that really concern us in

Huang Junxiang

terms of day to day bread-and-butter issues. And for me at least, there is no disconnect between me wanting to tell stories and being market ready. For the stories I want to tell, I want to make sure that there's a chance that there's an audience who's willing to listen. Whether it's successful or not, that depends. You have to gamble and then see.

Regina Teo

In terms of choosing films with a market angle, I'm wondering if there is a difference between when you worked as a producer in Zhao Wei Films, compared to now as a freelancer?

Huang Junxiang

I don't think my views are too different from Zhao Wei's views. I think Zhao Wei has always been very conscious that filmmaking is also a business. And to be sustainable, it is difficult. We're not just talking about financial sustainability, we're talking about emotional sustainability as well. You don't want to keep begging for favours into your mid to late 30s.

I think I'd be more than happy to take on, let's say, a more auteur-driven work, but it needs to be relative to the budget. Everything needs to be relative to the budget. For example, if I think the film is going to have a small audience, then we need to mitigate the risk by finding a way to manage the budget.

Also, track record is very important. As a producer, you're providing a value proposition to your director which is important in terms of what you can bring to the table. But you'd also need to be able to demonstrate to your investors a track record of success and sustainability.

Regina Teo

I see. One of your first producing experiences was under an established director like Eric Khoo, how was that experience?

Huang Junxiang

I feel that it's always good to work with a more experienced team at the start, for you to experience more. Rather than going through years of making certain mistakes, you learn faster about the mistakes not to make. You learn how to spot certain things faster.

The downside is that there are certain structures in place already. Definitely, you may not be able to innovate as much as you'd like with an established director, and the conversation may not be equal. They will have more say, but you have to take it for what it is. I think that's why it was important for me to also take on my own projects separate from that after a while.

Regina Teo

How do you navigate or talk about creative vision with the director? As a producer, do you have an equal say, or as much say, as the director?

Huang Junxiang

It depends, because there's always the delegate producer. For the early films that I did like *In the Room* (2015), and even Eric Khoo's films, I'm definitely not the delegate producer. I would be able to provide my perspective, but it will not be a persuasive or definitive one. With different directors, you have different levels of authority when providing a strong opinion. I'm also always very conscious to point out that it's the director that makes the final decision. But I would advocate for what I feel in very strong terms. I will keep nagging and I'll keep repeating my point of view, especially if I believe in it strongly, until it is really taken into account and is really strongly considered. I think the only areas which are

Huang Junxiang non-negotiable, is when it is contractual. If the contract requires certain considerations, let's say it must hit a certain censorship rating in order to gain an audience, then those are non-compromisable obligations that the director has to fulfil.

Regina Teo *Do you have any tips for negotiation between these various stakeholders, especially when there are so many people to mediate? Do you have something you prioritise, and how do you work around it?*

Huang Junxiang More often than not, I think you are negotiating with the personality rather than the actual terms of the contract for most people. I think it's about being authentic and being sincere, negotiating and understanding their concerns first from a very human perspective before it becomes a business perspective. That usually makes it easier. But some people are obviously very numbers-driven, so you just have to adapt to what their priorities are. For me, it's always about trying to really understand what their intentions and goals are and matching to that.

Another thing when going into negotiations is that you need to know your baseline in your negotiating power. You need to know how much you need it, and you need to also be cool about it. Before you get into any deal, you need to know what the negotiating dynamics are, what the power dynamic will be down the road as well. It's very easy to be pushed around by different producing parties or partners, depending on what it is. Specific to newer producers, I guess it's always important to be very careful before jumping into any co-production or any relationship. You need to really spend time to get to know the project and the individual first because you're talking about four to five, six years of your life, potentially. It's like buying a house or dating someone – you won't date the first person that you talk to that likes you. So the same thing applies, but you know, people forget that because they're so excited about making a film.

Regina Teo *Regarding your negotiations with sales agents and distributors, how do you determine the value of your film?*

Huang Junxiang All the value of the film is perceived. It is what you perceive, what they perceive and whether you can agree with their perception, or whether they can come closer to your perception of what the value of the film is. That is the negotiation process. How you ascribe a value to it will be based on precedent, current market and of course current box office. You always do a comparison with what has come before and what's their rough box office. That will be the very mathematical way to go about doing it.

Regina Teo *You have experience producing OTT series, how does that differ from indie films?*

Huang Junxiang When you work with OTT, you're working with a client who has picked up your project for a very specific purpose. You need to listen to their purpose and listen to their intention. Here, you're going to have two different things. You're going to have a perception; they have an understanding of who the key markets are, and what marketing works and what kind of content works for their market. Now, whether that works in your opinion or not, that is the potential friction that comes into play. And I think that's why you need to service, in a way, their needs and wants.

Huang Junxiang Let's use the example of having a star attached to a series. A series could work very well without stars. Totally. A series could also fail because it has no stars, right? But the difference here is that the OTT will blame you if the series doesn't work because you didn't attach a star to it when they requested it. Then you have allowed an avenue to open as to why the series didn't gain traction, which will be based on precedent and market research. Data is such a big thing with OTT, even networks. It's all very data-driven. So what you're doing is you're trying to work with the data, but also try to inject and craft something to your showrunners' intentions and visions as well.

Regina Teo *In that respect, how much flexibility or negotiating power do you have when you're working with OTT platforms?*

Huang Junxiang It comes in two phases. First phase is your development phase. Once the scripts are done, then you go into production greenlight. That's the second contract that you sign. And before they sign any contract, there are requirements that will be put to the table, which I don't think is something that is negotiable. The question of who though, is possible. But of course it's not so cut and dry, because you may have more than one role in your series and it's about balancing that. Maybe you can have one superstar and the rest can be new faces. Or maybe you could get somebody who hasn't acted in 10 years. I think that's the creativity of a producer in terms of how you interpret that and how you problem solve that.

Regina Teo *As a director-writer as well, how do you juggle between a producing-centric train of thought and letting yourself flow creatively as a writer?*

Huang Junxiang I don't know whether I manage it very well. I think having a base of what you watch and what you enjoy would help. There's a lot of good storytelling, a lot of good direction if you watch films that don't require explosions, or special effects. It's just really good direction, and very thoughtful storytelling. I think more like that when I problem solve while writing.

And then of course, there are some things which you feel like you'd really need for your story to look great and you would really want to see on screen, but it's going to be very expensive. Write it first, and then work with a producer to solve it. That's why all directors must have a good producer. I feel strongly about this.

You must be willing to indulge yourself and to say, "I do want to try to see whether this could work". And of course it needs to be an educated gamble. Let's say you don't know how to do it, but at least write it in first, and you can resolve it later. But obviously, it can't be the entire premise unless you already have a model and idea of how it work.

Regina Teo *Any advice for first time producers doing their feature film?*

Huang Junxiang I think eventually making the film isn't going to be as difficult as you think it is. The advice I have is that you need to really think about your model in terms of how and where the film is going to be financially sustainable. What will the film do for you in the future, what sort of producer do you want to be and why do you want to produce? This needs to be taken in context with all the other producers out there as well. You'd really need to think about the model and who is out there. Before jumping into producing, see who's there, who's doing

Huang Junxiang what, how are they doing it, what are they doing well in, and of course what do you want to do.

Regina Teo *What advice do you have for gaining this exposure? Is it joining more labs, workshops?*

Huang Junxiang Labs are helpful for a specific type of producer, and certain labs are better than others, which is natural. I think it is good to get to talk to different producers out there and to try to understand the market. When embarking on a first feature, maybe have a more senior producer to consult with, someone who's done it before. Then at least you know what you're getting yourself into. Even if you pay for the producer's time, it's worth it because his or her experience is going to save you a lot of time. You have to treat it as tuition fees also.

I think the reason why I have managed to do the things I do is that I tried to think a little bit more broadly and flexibly in terms of how to do things, and not to follow conventions. Something like this, which I've just proposed, is not something that many people do. But you can see the immediate benefits when I explain it to you, right? So I think you need to come up with your own solutions as the problems come up, and you will never be able to foresee all problems.

Regina Teo *It's true. In your career then, have you experienced burnout?*

Huang Junxiang Yes, definitely. I think the issue of burnout is very serious. There are multiple times where I felt really tired and exhausted. And I think that's why you need a certain tenacity for this line of work. A lot of people begin to change industries when they hit their mid to late 30s, but I don't see them as quitting the industry per se. I just see it as they have enjoyed a journey in film and now it's time to do other things.

But it is a very serious thing, especially in Singapore because the cost of living is very high, which makes it even harder with parental expectations. The parental expectations actually hurt your journey in a way, because you are no longer thinking for the project. You are thinking for the money or you are thinking of how to be sustainable and maybe sometimes you don't devote the right amount of time or energy in the right ways. If I'm thinking about how to make the best project, it's different from thinking about how to make a project that makes the most money, right?

You have only a finite amount of time and whatever you choose to do will come to define what you are capable of doing. Rather than jumping into everything too early, it's better to consider more in how you do it. And I think that's something that I would have liked to do a bit more often when I was younger as well.

Regina Teo *What are your goals and plans for the future?*

Huang Junxiang My goal is to hopefully provide an alternative to Jack Neo in Singapore in terms of commercial cinema. But given the type of films that I want to produce, the market size may not as big. So I'd need to take that into consideration as well. And really, going back to my first goal, I just want to improve my craft a lot more. I feel that there are certain things that I'm better at, and I want to always try to go back to the fundamentals and

Huang Junxiang watch more films, do some editing, just making content. I think it's easy to forget that process. It can get very busy and it is a very demanding line of work.

Hopefully, I can also do more work with regional producers to tell good stories. And I hope that in maybe five years' time, I can also take on a part-time role related to scriptwriting and revision, like a script doctor. That's something I'd like to do.

Regina Teo *I see, that is all I have for this interview. Thank you so much for your time, I appreciate your insights and advice!*

by **Regina Teo** (regina.teo@outlook.com) is a producer and writer based in Singapore. In 2021, she obtained a Bachelor's in Communication Studies at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, specialising in Broadcast and Cinema Studies with a Minor in Modern Languages (Korean). Regina produced her final year project NIGHT BLOOM (2021), which was selected for film festivals including the 2021 Toronto International Women Film Festival. She then worked at Little Red Ants Creative Studio, producing various corporate and commercial videos. She was a 2023 fellow of the International Film Business Academy at Busan Asian Film School, before doing an internship at Hive Filmworks Inc, a Korean production house specialising in international co-production, sales and IP management. Regina is currently working as an independent filmmaker.



LAI WEIJIE

Producer

Singapore

Interview by TAN Shu-Ying, Regina (Gina TAN)



Lai Weijie is a film producer based in Singapore and Toronto. In 2010 he co-founded E&W Films, a Singapore-based film development and production company. He is the producer of *Pop Aye* (2017) by Kirsten Tan which received awards at Sundance, Rotterdam, and Zurich; *Taste* (2021) by Lê Bảo, that received the Special Jury Award in the Encounters section of the Berlinale; and is co-producer of *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021), winner of the Golden Leopard in Locarno. His upcoming projects include CNC Development Award recipient *Mongrel* by Chiang Wei Liang, developed at the Cannes Residence, Talents Tokyo, and TorinoFilmLab ScriptLab. Weijie has several years of experience as a senior programmer, formerly at the Singapore International Film Festival, developing its film academy and overseeing its Asian selection. He has served on the selection committee for several fund bodies.



TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina
Lai Weijie

Can you share how you started your career as a film producer?

It was when I was in National Service, where I had a lot of free time and ended up building my film vocabulary and library, and watched a lot of films without any sort of curation. I was the most receptive to everything at that time. While doing my bachelor's degree in philosophy at the National University of Singapore, I joined a film society where I met Kirsten Tan, Tan Bee Thiam, Derek Loo, Kristin Saw from IMDA, Derek Tan and Ho Jia Jian from Viddsee, all of whom are now part of the industry. At this film club, nuSTUDIOS, we attempted to create short films, and that's when I became truly passionate about filmmaking.

After graduating, I decided to enroll at NYU Tisch School of the Arts Asia. Initially, I thought I wanted to become a director, but it was in school where I realized I didn't possess the personality traits required for it, at least at the level that I wanted to be at. However, I noticed that I possessed a skill set better suited for producing. It was during my time in film school that I came to terms with not pursuing a career as a director, and identified the kind of producer I aspired to be—one who serves the film.

Just as I was about to graduate, Homerun Asia, the newly opened company by Raintree Pictures producer Daniel Yun, needed a producer, and I began working for them. That was when I earned my first feature film credit, *Homecoming* by Lee Thean-jeen.

Subsequently, I left Homerun Asia and through MM2 Entertainment I got to work on *That Girl In The Pinafore* by Chai Yee Wei. In between, I worked for Wee Li Lin and Charles Lim. Around that time, the Singapore International Film Festival approached me, and I decided to join them as it aligned more closely with the type of films I was interested in making. I reconnected with Kirsten, produced her NYU graduation short film, *Dahdi*, at NYU, and continued working together on her feature film, *Pop Aye*. This has been my path in terms of producing since then.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

What prompted you to start E&W Films? Can you share with us your strategy and direction of the company?

Lai Weijie

Starting the company was actually for practical reasons. I wanted to make a feature film as my graduation work at NYU, knowing I might not ever have the opportunity again, and that it would cost a significant amount of money. So my girlfriend, now my wife, and I decided to open a company, so it would feel more legitimate when asking people to give us money to make a film. Since then we just kept the company open while I was doing other things like working for Homerun Asia, MM2, SGIFF etc. There wasn't necessarily a clear strategy or direction, it was really based on something very practical.

As for the type of projects we take on, there isn't really any specific type of film that we want to do. For us, it's more abstract, there needs to be a natural sort of chemistry between yourself and the other potential collaborator, and if it makes sense to work together, then we work together. We don't deliberately choose "issue-driven films" for example, it's more like the projects we choose to do come from a genuine place of collaboration.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

Would you say, the direction for the company right now is gearing towards co-production?

Lai Weijie

I don't think of it so formally as co-production, at least until the project is more advanced. I simply saw it as films and filmmakers I genuinely wanted to collaborate with. If arbitrarily they happened to be Singaporean, Vietnamese, French, or from any other nationality, that was perfectly fine with me.

When IMDA launched the co-production grant it changed things a little bit. It is easier to co-produce now as compared to the past, when each project would take 5-7 years to develop and financially it was a lot more challenging. I was a lot more particular back then, because I would be taking projects on as a delegate producer which entailed far more work. But now I can afford to co-produce more films and have a minority role. It wasn't that the company was necessarily gearing towards co-production.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

What kind of projects are you attracted to? What elements do you consider when accepting a new project?

Lai Weijie

It changes all the time and there's no set way that I end up coming onboard as a producer. For most of my projects, the genesis of collaboration has been because of friendship. For Kirsten, a big part of it was actually because we were in the film club together. For Wei Liang, I had known him for a very long time before we started doing short films together and that was also out of friendship.

It was a little different for Lê Bảo's film. I saw his short films as a programmer at SGIFF and I really really liked them. To me, they really stood out. At that time I hadn't visited Vietnam before and always wanted to visit. Because of my work with SGIFF, I was thinking as a programmer and I was just curious to meet this person because of his vision and his storytelling. I was curious about him as an individual. We hung out over three days in Vietnam and that's when I realised he was trying to make a feature and didn't know how. I thought at that time, maybe I can help out, and it just kind of snowballed and we ended up working together. So it happened that way - from watching his short films. Though the general pattern is, filmmakers that are friends, that I've known for a very long time.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

Can you share some of your experiences dealing with international co-production and collaborators?

Lai Weijie

I think for me, before all the business, it is to really form a genuine sort of connection with the people you are working with. Because at the end of the day, the film process is difficult no matter what. And when you're doing all that administrative stuff, the administration is the same, but it's who you want to be doing the administration with or fighting all the different problems with. Then also, to think about what value they can offer, apart from the more banal elements like money. Money is usually a given and a dull way of looking at co-production, but think about what the person can offer to benefit the project, and you can learn from. It can be things like offering feedback, recommending talents and stuff like that, which I think is really important.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

I understand you are based overseas. How viable is it for a local producer to be based abroad, are there any pros and cons?

Lai Weijie

I never really thought of E&W Films as viable. I know it sounds naive but as much as possible, I would like to not have to compromise on the types of films that I would like to produce, because no matter what the film is, it is always difficult. Naturally the types of films we veer towards, I know that it's not necessarily going to put food on the table so I can't be deluded about it from the start.

My move to Canada in 2019 coincided with the pandemic. This industry feeds on information but once you're that far away, your information is always going to be a little bit slow. And I am adjusting to that. On the other hand, being away really helps crystallize what you want to do with each project. And in a way, a lot of that noise and information is irrelevant. Even though I might not have first hand information about a lot of things, at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter because it balances out in different ways.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

Can I segue into something you mentioned earlier about sustainability of producing in Singapore?

Lai Weijie

I realised early on, during my time in film school, that the films I wanted to make vs. the films that are being played in the cinemas don't really align. I am not able or interested in making the kinds of films that typically lead to a sustainable career. So, I realised very quickly that film producing wasn't artistically or professionally feasible for me.

I knew I needed something sustainable. When I was working at the Singapore International Film Festival, it was a very nice sort of complimentary thing. I was getting to watch films that I like and getting to meet new filmmakers, and it was similar to the kind of films I wanted to make. That worked out really nicely. When I wasn't working at the film festival, I was teaching at different film schools in Singapore. I really enjoyed that as well, and even now in Canada, I teach at the University of Toronto. I like teaching because I enjoy learning from my students and I don't want to end up being this dinosaur that doesn't care about what the next generation thinks. I am always interested in listening to students' ideas and talking to them about what they are thinking about.

Projects like *Pop Aye* took five years to come together, *Taste* took seven years, *Mongrel* started properly in 2019, with an expected completion date in 2024. So at the end of the day, even with all the co-production grants, it is not sustainable because of the amount of time it takes for a film to come together. In my case, I have decided on teaching or film festival programming to keep myself sustainable and engaged, so I can do E&W Films without thinking about compromise. It is just about making films that we are passionate about.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

Can you share your thoughts on what is the best way for young producers to start?

Lai Weijie

I think the starting point would be to find a person to work with, or a collaborator, or a project that you really, really believe in. Whether it's a friend's project or not, you just focus on getting that right. You may spend more time, but you have to get the project off the ground and kind of go forward from there.

In all my projects before *Pop Aye*, there were always more senior producers helping out, and of course this was very helpful. You'll learn a lot working under others, seeing the

Lai Weijie

things you agree with and don't agree with. But until you actually find a project, really believe in it, finally produce it on your own and just suffer through that first time, no one believes in you. So that's the tough one. When you finally produce your first feature, you prove to yourself and the industry that you can do it.

You have to think of different ways you can put things together. In the case of *Pop Aye*, our strategic decision was to bring Anthony Chen from Giraffe Pictures on board. Before convincing him to join, we had secured several awards and grants internationally that helped make our case. His involvement made the process much smoother because people were more willing to listen to his input.

So, if you have a new project and people are closing the door on you, it makes sense to team up with someone strategically, and of course you have to get along with them. It could also mean that you are speaking with the wrong people. Sometimes people just need that kind of legitimacy to trust the project a little bit more especially when there is a new person coming up.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

For more established producers to come onboard, we all know that solid packaging is very important. Can you elaborate a bit more on that?

Lai Weijie

When I think about packaging a film, it is a very difficult thing. One thing to think about is, there's no one package for all. You have to be very clear about what type of film you are making. Who is your audience? And when I say that, I don't mean generic demographics like male, above 25. Nothing generic like that, don't see people as numbers but genuinely, think, who is this film for?

You have to be very self aware. You have to imagine you're on the other side of the table, and ask yourself, why would or should I want to work with this person or on this project? Very often in a pitch or meeting or presenting a dossier, the other party is forming an opinion: can I trust them? Do I think they can pull this off? Are they the right people for this project? That small shift in perspective reshaped a lot of how I started preparing packages. To not think so much about myself and the project and what I like, but rather who is the person, who is the company or who is the foundation that I would like to share this project with. What is the pitch you can give to them? Are they the right party to be pitching to?

Of course it has to be a person that is aligned with the project. Also, think about what you can do to make your project special. There are many deserving projects out there, you have to think why should they support you and not the others.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

My next question is a bit more general. I wonder what are your general thoughts about the Singapore film industry? And what would you want to change in the industry if you could?

Lai Weijie

I tend to not think so much about that. I go with the flow and see whatever direction it takes. I think I am not really answering your question, but I like diversity in all forms, and if we were to take an indirect sort of comparison, I think the reason *The Projector* is doing so well compared to other more commercial cinemas in Singapore is because they are

Lai Weijie

able to embrace changes and are always nimble. In contrast, the more established cinema chains often seem reluctant to change models, and to be honest, none of their staff seem even remotely interested in cinema. I like what *The Projector* is doing. It seems funny to say, but it's as simple as people doing what they like, and it shows. That's why so many people want to collaborate with them, because they're doing interesting things and keeping audiences engaged. And to a certain extent, I think that's happening in the film industry in Singapore, whether quickly or slowly. And I like that. The aspects of the Singapore industry that I'm not so keen on I just try not to engage with.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

Is it difficult to be a director for your own film and then a producer for others at the same time?

Lai Weijie

My advice would be that you must be both adaptable and disciplined. It is a very difficult thing to do. You want to make sure that when you perform the role of a producer, you are not secretly wanting to shadow direct, and vice versa. That is not helpful and it's not what I need. It's important to focus on what your role is, with knowledge of course of the other fields, but not to overstep into other's territory.

I was just thinking about it in relation to a different role. Like an editor I admire very very much. His name is Lee Chatametikool and I spent a lot of time with him, because I've had the opportunity to work with him on a couple of films. He's so amazing, because I remember when I was editing my most recent film, he was simultaneously editing five films. And the five films are completely different. But he's so in control of himself and his life, that he can switch. So what he'll do is he will have five-day blocks where he will cut one film, and then he will take the weekend to completely decompress before transitioning to the next project the following week. He was able to do that because he had the discipline that he had built up over decades of experience, to be able to switch off and on to cater to the specific needs of each film. So I think it's about having that control and awareness of yourself.

TAN Shu-Ying,
Regina

*I thought *Pop Aye* was very well made but it must have been a very difficult film to produce, because it's a different language, different culture and country, with animals & children involved. Would you be able to share your approach for the film?*

Lai Weijie

In every film project I take on as a producer, the unknown is kind of interesting. I want every project to give me a different challenge, to throw me off-course and dig deep. *Pop Aye* on paper is a project that is so ridiculous that you question how you are going to do it, and that is what makes it inherently exciting. Most people will think it can't be done, but since the stakes are so low, there's no risk in not trying. I remember both Kirsten and I thinking early on when we started to pick up a lot of awards for the project while it was in development, we were both puzzled and coming to the realization that we would really have to figure out how to make this film, that it was slowly becoming real. I worked on *Taste*, a film in Vietnam where I couldn't speak Vietnamese, and the director had limited English proficiency. The language barrier makes it interesting because it defies a pragmatic sort of logic, and that's precisely what makes a project stand out.

I can't reveal the selection committee I was recently on, but when you're on the other side, and you read many proposals, you see that most of them are basically the same. But

Lai Weijie

there's going to be a few that are so interesting. The ones that stand out are so unique and so clear about what they are, they are not going to say generic things, they are specific, simple, clear. Just from the way they phrase it, you believe in it, and only when you see such a quantity of projects do you realise and learn. So a film like *Pop Aye* or *Taste* or *Mongrel*, I don't necessarily know how it's going to go when I start, but that is what brings you to interesting territories. And that unconventional perspective will reflect in your proposal and financing plan. When you think about it differently and find surprising sources of finance, then suddenly your proposal looks and feels different.

TAN Shu-Ying, Regina

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

Lai Weijie

I think you have to own it. I like to think that everyone is a distinct, unique individual. Be clear about who you are and what interests you. Have clarity about certain aspects of yourself and your company, or at least have a loose sense of where you aim to be. While there will always be many unknowns, there should be some concrete elements. Go in with the knowledge of what's happening around you. Before passing judgments, you have to gain at least a basic understanding of the subject. Which is why I think it was important for me to work at Homerun Asia and MM2. It was useful and made me appreciate things.

It is important to be aware of those who came before you and the emerging younger generation, finding your place within the ecosystem. Ultimately, it all boils down to self-awareness. The rest will naturally fall into place.

TAN Shu-Ying, Regina

Thank you so much for sharing and giving me your time, it was so nice hearing from you. I feel like I've gotten such a good perspective!

by **TAN Shu-Ying, Regina** (reginatan.sy@gmail.com) is a Singapore-based director and producer. Her short film *Pencil* gained recognition at international film festivals and won Best Film and Best Screenplay at the 2018 Singapore National Youth Film Awards. She also produced *The Drum*, a film featured in competition at the Clermont Ferrand International Short Film Festival. Having worked extensively across Asia with partners from diverse backgrounds, Gina brings a wealth of cross-cultural insights to her projects, infusing them with a global appeal. A fellow at the Busan Asian Film School (AFiS), she's developing two feature films, *Us, For Now* and *Paper Tiger*, both reflecting her commitment to women-centred themes and influenced by her experience working in China.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection : Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals





JAGATH MANUWARNA KODITHUWAKKU

Actor / Screenwriter / Director

Sri Lanka



Interview by Nayomi KUMARASINGHE (Nayomi APSARA)



Jagath Manuwarna Kodithuwakku, born in 1980 in Kandy, Sri Lanka, has made significant accomplishments in the realms of acting, media presentation, scriptwriting, filmmaking, and politics. A product of Delthota Central College, Kandy, he honed his skills at the Tower Hall Drama School, Colombo. Jagath commenced his journey with Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation in 2003 as a presenter.

Recognized for his talents, Jagath clinched the Best Upcoming Actor award at both the Sumathi Television Awards in 2009 and Raigam Tele's in 2011. With a diverse portfolio spanning over 10 movies and tele-dramas, he has garnered numerous national-level accolades. Venturing into filmmaking, his debut short film *Gindara Poddak* secured the prestigious title of Best Short Film at the 2006 Guerilla Film Festival in Sri Lanka. Notably, two of his other shorts, *The Dark Fall* and *Water Lilly*, earned the Best Short Film accolade at the Agenda Short Film Festival in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

The evolution of *Water Lilly* into Jagath's inaugural feature film, *Whispering Mountains*, marked a triumph on the international stage. The film received acclaim at prestigious film festivals such as the Busan International Film Festival and the International Film Festival Rotterdam, where Jagath was honored with the NETPAC Award. In the realm of television, his debut series, *Kodi Gaha Yata*, currently holds the distinction of being the highest-rated Sri Lankan TV series on IMDb.

Jagath Manuwarna Kodithuwakku's multifaceted journey, from the small screen to the global film stage, reflects a remarkable career, celebrated both nationally and internationally.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE
Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

What inspired you to become a filmmaker?

Well, it's a bit hazy, but I've had the desire to be involved in the arts since childhood. Growing up in the eighties in Sri Lanka, cinema was on a decline, but television became our primary source of entertainment. I vividly remember watching shows like *Knight Rider*, *Palingu Manike*, and others on a television charged by a car battery since we didn't have electricity at home. Additionally, the burning of cinemas during the 1983 Black July incident and the popularity of television heroes played a role in shaping my interests. My parents, who had an appreciation for art, further influenced me. So, when I left school, I came to Colombo to pursue acting, taking courses at the Tower Hall Foundation and immersing myself in film festivals at cultural centers.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

It seems you've faced some challenges, like suspensions and bans, from a young age?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

(Laughs) Yes, travel bans, film bans, class suspensions – I've become quite accustomed to them.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

During your time in Colombo, how did you transition from acting to directing?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

While at the film cooperation, I met Mr. Shelton Payagala, a teacher who played a significant role in my journey. I pursued a diploma, attended workshops, and eventually started making short films. One of these short films later evolved into my debut feature film, *Whispering Mountains*.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

So, you've been on this journey since 2001?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

Yes, and the feature film took shape in 2017.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

Moving on to your role as an actor and director, what differences do you see in perception?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

As an actor, I portray someone else's ideas, but as a director, I can stand up for my own beliefs and ideas. It allows for more freedom of expression, although considerations for the audience's reception are still crucial.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

Politics and cinema seem intertwined in your life. How do you navigate both worlds?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

I don't see them as separate entities; everything is political. Craft released to the public is influenced by the political climate. For instance, the trend of 'Jathaka Stories' in cinema has political undertones, even if not overtly acknowledged. My cinema is inherently political; you can't separate politics and cinema.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

Is there a specific audience for your cinema, and how challenging is it to connect with them?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

The reception depends on the country's economic, political, and cultural environment. Considering the current political climate in Sri Lanka, I believe my film will engage the audience well. There's a growing niche audience for arthouse cinema, and with changing audience preferences, there's potential for broader acceptance.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

*Your experience suggests that teamwork is essential. How was the process of financing *Whispering Mountains*?*

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

Originally, I planned a high-budget film, but when I couldn't find a financier, I turned *Whispering Mountains* into an extended version of another project. Mr. Sunil T Fernando invested in the shooting, but funding for post-production took until 2023 to secure.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

As an emerging filmmaker, what challenges did you face in executing the film and TV series projects?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

I aimed to break stereotypes in Sri Lankan TV and faced challenges from cast and crew who were used to conventional TV. Long-running TV series, with tight deadlines, proved more demanding than film production.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

What are your future plans, both artistically and politically?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

Activism has always been part of my life and will continue alongside cinema. I plan to continue my work in politics, possibly even considering a role in the parliament if the need arises.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

Given your journey, what changes do you hope to see in the Sri Lankan film industry?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

While some directors are pushing for change, global platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime contribute significantly to audience preferences. Adapting to these global shifts is crucial for the industry's evolution.

Nayomi
KUMARASINGHE

What advice do you have for aspiring filmmakers?

Jagath Manuwarna
Kodithuwakku

Define your calling and focus on your passion. Whether it's filmmaking, directing, or acting, understand why you're doing it and work hard towards your goals.

by **Nayomi KUMARASINGHE** (nayomi.apsara@gmail.com) is a filmmaker, curator, and a published author. Her debut short movie, *#The_Tea_is_Cold* (2023) which she produced, wrote, and directed had its Asian Premiere at the Busan International Short Film Festival and Jaffna International Cinema Festival. Nayomi's experimental student project *Pick me up* was screened at the Tropfest International Film Festival 2010 in Melbourne. She curated 'Teargas Cinema' at the recent Sri Lankan protests, and volunteered at Melbourne International Film Festival and International Film Festival of Colombo. In 2023, Nayomi graduated from the International Film Business Academy at Busan Asian Film School.

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PRASANNA VITHANAGE

Director

Sri Lanka

Interview by Bavaneedha LOGANATHAN



Prasanna Vithanage is a distinguished Sri Lankan filmmaker, widely regarded as one of the most influential filmmakers in South Asia. He is known for thought-provoking films that delve into social, political, and cultural issues, defying conventional categorizations with his innovative storytelling. His works have garnered numerous awards and accolades both locally and internationally, reflecting his commitment to excellence and his ability to create rich, multidimensional characters that resonate with audiences. Prasanna Vithanage became involved in theatre after leaving school. He translated and directed George Bernard Shaw's play, *Arms and the Man*, in 1986. In 1991, he directed his first film, *Sisila Gini Gani* (Ice of Fire), which won nine OCIC awards, including Best Director. His second feature, *Anantha Rathriya* (Dark Night of the Soul), based on Leo Tolstoy's last novel, *Resurrection*, was shown at several international film festivals and won a Jury's Special Mention in the First Pusan International Film Festival. In 1997, *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day) won the Grand Prix at the Amiens Film Festival. Initially banned in Sri Lanka by the minister in charge of the film industry, it was released after a year-long legal battle and became one of the most commercially successful films in Sri Lanka. *Ira Madiyama* (August Sun) won many international awards and was featured prominently in the world festival circuit. *Gaadi - Children of the Sun*, and many more, have cemented his reputation as a trailblazer in the third generation of Sri Lankan cinema. Prasanna Vithanage directed his first Indian language film, *Paradise*, in Malayalam. It is one of the highlights of Prasanna Vithanage's career, which won the prestigious Kim Jiseok Award for Best Film at the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF 2023).

Prasanna Vithanage's career spans decades and encompasses a wide range of genres and themes, from insightful explorations of societal dynamics to historical dramas and documentaries. He has actively battled censorship in Sri Lanka, championing freedom of expression in cinema. As an educator, Vithanage has conducted many Master classes in the subcontinent, nurturing young filmmakers and enthusiasts.



Bavaneedha Loganathan

Looking back at your creative journey, if you could time travel to any period or moment in your early days as a creator, what specific time frame and experience would you choose to revisit, and why?

Prasanna Vithanage

My journey as a creator began in my childhood. I was amazed to see scenes moving on the big screen after the lights went out in the theaters when I was around 4 or 5 years old. I wondered, "Who is behind this curtain? Why don't we move when only those inside the screen are moving? Have we entered a new world?" These amazing experiences were what initially attracted me to cinema. It was my passion for moving images that eventually led me to become a filmmaker.

As the only child of my parents, I received abundant love and knowledge from them. Both of my parents had a strong interest in cinema and literature, and we used to go to the theater every week to watch movies. Their passion for cinema exposed me to local art films, Indian Tamil films, and international films from a very early age.

Initially, I went to see movies with my parents. After moving to Colombo for schooling, I started going to the theater alone at the age of 11, forming a habit of watching movies independently. Additionally, my parents were avid readers, and I inherited the habit of reading from them. I delved into world literature at a very young age, fostering my interest in both literature and cinema. The combination of literature and cinema played a crucial role in shaping my creativity.

Bavaneedha Loganathan

Being a first-time director in Sri Lanka during challenging times must have been a remarkable chapter in your career. Could you share your reflections on the emotional and practical aspects of your experience?

Prasanna Vithanage

At that time, I didn't have much on-set experience, having only participated in a few films. Despite this, I ventured into directing based on what I had learned through self-study and director Vasantha Obeysekera's screenwriting classes. Surprisingly, I faced no hesitation or fear, as my exposure to world cinema had equipped me with knowledge and skills. I possessed complete confidence in what I wanted to achieve. Reflecting on it now, I realize I was a bit overconfident back then. The cast and crew supported me, and the film turned out exceptionally well. While accolades have poured in, it's only now that I recognize a sense of fear with a successful career. (laughs)

Bavaneedha Loganathan

We're particularly intrigued about your experience learning screenplay writing with Director Vasantha Obeysekera. Could you share how this encounter has impacted your understanding and practice of screenwriting?

Prasanna Vithanage

One day, I came across an advertisement in 'Silumina' magazine about a screenwriting class conducted by Vasantha Obeysekera, a pioneering director of the second-generation Sri Lankan Cinema. Filled with enthusiasm, I channeled my creativity into writing a letter. In the letter, I proudly expressed my love for *Seven Samurai* and other world cinemas, and highlighted my extensive experience and knowledge of numerous films. Concurrently, my father, who worked as a tax officer, happened to meet Vasantha Obesakara and mentioned my application. Consequently, I received an interview call. However, during the interview, he asserted that 16 years old was too young for me to join

**Prasanna
Vithanage**

the class. In response, I immediately confronted my own arrogance. He understood me and gave me the chance to join the class.

Up until then, Sri Lankan films were primarily dialogue-driven. I gained from him a deeper understanding of the importance of human behavior in script writing. I learned how people behave, how they think, and the significance of writing and visual knowledge. Another invaluable lesson I acquired from him was the concept that all humans are the same.

**Bavaneedha
Loganathan**

Being equally passionate about literature and cinema, you've adapted numerous works into films and plays. How has your love for literature shaped your filmmaking approach? Can you discuss the impact of literary involvement on your creative decisions and storytelling methods? Additionally, do you have any advice for the younger generation of filmmakers regarding integrating literature into their work?

**Prasanna
Vithanage**

I can find the answer in the words of the world's greatest director, Akira Kurosawa. Once, a journalist asked Kurosawa what he wanted to say to the younger generation. His response was to encourage reading—Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy. Kurosawa believed that through reading books, one can understand how to convey a fully rounded experience. Sometimes, when I watch movies by young filmmakers, I see their passion, but there's a lack of a full-rounded experience. It often contains the individual's subjective truth, which may not resonate with others. Emotional experiences should transform into films that embody objective truth. We need to observe both the external and internal aspects of a situation. Taking on a story requires examining both the subjective and objective viewpoints. Reading books, especially literature, can provide valuable lessons. I wholeheartedly believe in Kurosawa's statement, and I don't have many words apart from what he said.

**Bavaneedha
Loganathan**

*Your film *Death on a Full Moon Day* (1997) holds significance as the first to secure international funding and elevate your profile on the international filmmaking scene. Can you share the origins of this project, and the crucial steps that contributed to its success on the global stage?*

**Prasanna
Vithanage**

I invested myself in the film *Dark Night of the Soul* (Anantha Rathriya), taking a loan from the bank, producing advertising films, and staging plays to generate income. I then completed my third film *Death on a Full Moon Day* through funding. The Japanese government-funded NHK (the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) provided 40,000 USD. That's what they told me when providing the funding, and it made me feel responsible. I served as the main producer, with a Japanese producer visiting the shoot. The script initially comprised three stories, but due to various problems obtaining permission to shoot during the war, we decided to film only one of them. Initially, NHK was apprehensive about this decision, however, in the end, they were very happy with the final output.

**Bavaneedha
Loganathan**

**Death on a Full Moon Day* is hailed as an iconic film in Sri Lankan cinema, celebrated for its box office success and numerous festival awards. However, your mention of the film having three untold stories that were later changed has piqued our curiosity. Could you shed light on these original narratives? What prompted the decision to alter them, and why were these stories not eventually filmed?*

**Prasanna
Vithanage**

At the beginning, three stories were planned: the story of the military soldier/son, who was beaten in the war and lost consciousness somewhere, and a woman attempting to claim him as her husband to receive compensation money; the second story, focusing on the father waiting for his soldier son; and the third, narrating the son's true lover and her struggles. Encountering numerous challenges, especially in obtaining permission to film in a wartime environment, we faced real issues in bringing these stories to life.

During our struggles, I met a remarkable person, an elderly lady from the village, who shared her own experiences. She explained that if one doesn't accept compensation money, others in the community criticize her, saying, "Hey...old woman, if you don't want that compensation money, give it to us. We can live off that money. Why are you still alive?" This revelation brought forth the genuine conflict at the heart of this issue. The father, grappling with the belief that accepting blood-stained money is a sin, adamantly refuses to acknowledge the loss. On the other hand, others view it as necessary for survival.

In the face of these complexities, I decided to focus solely on the father's story for the film. It was during this filmmaking process that I learned the importance of absorbing insights from both the location and its people. Filmmaking, to me, became a journey of learning from real-life experiences and adopting an attentive attitude toward the stories we tell.

**Bavaneedha
Loganathan**

*Your early films were known for their critiques of religion and cultural constraints, but a noticeable shift occurred after *Death on a Full Moon Day* in both narrative and artistic vision. Can you elaborate on the factors or experiences that prompted this change in your filmmaking approach?*

**Prasanna
Vithanage**

As a director and writer, one should always be attentive to understanding the true happenings in the country. My earlier films followed a classical narrative arc, but this film adopted a minimalist approach. In 1996, I attended film festivals in Japan and the Pusan International Film Festival for the first time. The films I witnessed there made me realize certain things; they seemed much closer to life than the films we were creating. This experience changed my perspective, prompting me to ponder on the kind of films that should be made—films that authentically depict life as it is lived, not as an idealized version.

Walls Within (Pawuru Walalu, 1998) is a melodrama, portraying a woman controlled by her culture, primarily influenced by religion. It expresses the anguish of her inability to align with her own thoughts, depicting a conflict between the individual and society, and society against the individual. In contrast *Death on a Full Moon Day* takes a minimalist approach, and reflects a reality shaped by law, initially not marked by brutality.

It was only after the 1983 riots that we witnessed the ferocity of war. As spectators, we relied on government-owned television, which often presented statistics only. Reflecting on the events in my hometown, Matale, during 1983, particularly the plight of Tamil people, largely traders running most grocery stores and pharmacies, I witnessed their shops being burnt down, never to return. This personal connection highlights that we, as a community, became mere onlookers. However, as an artist and a human being, I am not willing to remain passive. It is my duty, as a filmmaker, to speak about the war, conveying a message beyond being mere spectators.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

Your theater background adds a unique perspective to your work in film. How do you believe your experience in theater assists you in managing actors on the film set? Are there specific skills or insights from your theatrical journey that you prioritize when working with actors of different generations in the cinematic context?

Prasanna
Vithanage

I also cherish my actors. Every actor, from Sanath Gunathilake, Swarna Mallawarachchi, Tony Ranasinghe, and Malini Fonseka in the beginning, to the latest ones like Darshana Rajendran and Roshan Mathew, has delivered excellent performances. With my background in theater, I comprehend the actor's mindset, point of view, and their needs. Knowing what to say or not say to help them relax in front of the camera comes from my theater background. Building a character involves more than just behavior; it's about the character's development and journey, both internally and externally. This understanding comes from my theater background.

I never categorize actors by generation; I treat them as individuals. I always observe what they need, whether they have any conflicts, or if they are expecting something. I am always searching for that. On my set, if I have 50 actors, I have to look after each person. In every movie, I talk to them differently, communicating with them in distinct ways. Even people from the same generation have totally different personalities.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

In the context of the evolution of Sri Lankan cinema during your generation, a notable shift occurred towards international award-winning productions. However, your work stands out as a unique departure, focusing on film festivals and narrative cinema, delving into serious political themes. How did you develop this distinct visual approach that sets your films apart from the prevailing trends of your time?

Prasanna
Vithanage

I am always contemplating movies. What am I gaining from this movie? Cannes, Berlin, Busan—those are not my targets. I never think about that. My objective is what I derive from this movie, how I will transform and evolve myself in this movie. My personal feelings are more important than other things. That's why I've rejected a lot of offers. Sometimes I get great producers, but I never take on a project unless my morals and inner feelings align.

And also, my second reason—perhaps people interpret it differently, but I believe in entertainment. Entertainment means not songs, dance, fights. It means how you tell the story, how you convey certain things to the audience, and how you engage with the audience. If the audience can predict our next scenes beforehand, it's not good. I am always keen on keeping the story events minimal. I always strive to communicate with the audience. Sometimes it's not entirely fulfilling, but I always try to ensure the audience understands my film. That's called craftsmanship—the way you use words when structuring your writing. When directing, it's about structuring with images. Storytelling is not a problem of how we tell the story; it's about how we convey the story through images. It's a challenging task, like not giving in to the audience or simply going with the audience's current pace. You give whatever they want; you are completely accountable to the audience. The audience is clever.

Now, at 62, after a certain age, I try to understand how the filmmaker John Ford made over 100 movies that are still stunningly beautiful, very simple, yet full of underlying

Prasanna
Vithanage

depth. We can see and study his movies like *The Searchers*. How to tell the story very simply? It's not simple; it's simplicity. That's not an intellectual idea; it's emotion.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

In a separatist country like Sri Lanka, where divisions persist across various realms, including art, you've consistently sought out conversations with simple people. What inspired this choice, and how has it influenced your role as an artist, bridging the perceived gap between the artistic and common spheres in the country?

Prasanna
Vithanage

I believe it's an artist's duty. The Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos said, "As a filmmaker, you must keep in mind filmmaking is turning the wheel. If you turn the wheel, you can achieve certain attainments. Another generation will then turn the wheel. You are only one person, and it's hard to turn the cinema wheel yourself."

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

August Sun (2003) stands out as a favorite for many, and its portrayal of the Sri Lankan war, particularly the story of the boy Aralath, is both elegant and impactful. The decision to shoot a road movie during such a critical war period is intriguing. Can you share the challenges and inspirations that led to this unique approach, capturing both the natural essence of the conflict and the stories of minority people in Sri Lanka?

Prasanna
Vithanage

These three stories are true. The Aralath story, I heard from BBC worker Chandana Keerthi Bandara. He told me about the small boy who asked about his dog. The second story happened in Anuradhapura. The third story was told to me by the scriptwriter Priyantha Liyanage. Normally, all Sri Lankans face different problems at the same time, but we never know each other's problems. So we decided to make this screenplay. We are going to tell these stories in parallel, and the three main lead characters never know each other. It connects to the real Sri Lankan situation as a metaphor. In this multiplot, we explain the Sri Lankan situation to the world. Also in my political ideology, nationalism always divides people; we have to be humane. So, I decided to address the minority Muslim Tamil people's issues.

David Mamet's K.I.S.S theory explains 'Keep It Simple Stupid.' So, I kept all the shots very simple. Sometimes, when you are not constrained, you feel more. I traveled to Puttalam and Mannar, visited Muslim refugee camps, and researched, meeting people. I went to Anuradhapura, a historical religious city that, during the war, became a connecting point for North and South, where many soldiers stayed. After completing their duty, they came to relax, and a lot of brothels/ sex working places were created for them. I went there and observed how it happened. The third story is from the screenwriter and my friend's real life. He is no longer alive. In his real life, he always saw the real struggles and persistence of women. But Priyath had guilt as a journalist; he couldn't succeed in their searching journey. I realized this mindset.

Another challenge is casting, specifically extras. We have to cast extras who don't look like extras; that's our challenge. In Sri Lankan movies, extras often reveal that they are just extras. We can't feel that they are living people. So, we held workshops in many places to train them on how to feel and react, making them become refugees. Also, if we had Tamil and Muslim characters, Sinhalese actors acted in those roles and pronounced the language poorly. This normally happens in Sri Lankan cinema. They don't think about the real representation and authenticity of the character and film. I spent time choosing the

Prasanna
Vithanage

proper actors for my roles in that community. I found the actor Mansoor in a bar in Kalpitiya. He is a refugee; he showed me the little boy. I chose him as Aralath. Both of them are amateur actors and real refugees. We created a roadmap for the film. The story starts in Colombo, with a character beginning their journey from Colombo to Kalpitiya. Another character is coming from Anuradhapura to Kalpitiya. Other characters are coming from Mannar to Kalpitiya.

In the financing process, we won the Fribourg Film Festival Script Development Fund in Switzerland. It's produced by EAP Edirisinghe Group, local theater owners, distributors, and producers. Normally, they produce commercial movies, but they liked my previous movie, *Death on a Full Moon Day*, because it was commercially successful. They really liked my *August Sun* script and produced it. The budget was 9.6 million SLR, which was a high budget in Sri Lanka at that time. Luckily, it was selected for the Montreal Film Festival competition. After that, we received many invitations to other film festivals, including Rotterdam, Busan, South Asian film festivals, and the London festival. We also won the Hubert Bals Distribution Grant. After the film's release, it ran for 55 days in theaters and grew like wine. When I meet people from time to time, they always talk to me about this film. It's still growing.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

With You, Without You (2012) garnered significant attention as an important post-war film, especially since it was adapted from Fyodor Dostoyevski's short story, "A Gentle Creature." The film sparked controversy and discussions. What influenced you to choose this particular story for adaptation, and how did the narrative resonate with your filmmaking vision?

Prasanna
Vithanage

You and other people like films such as *August Sun*, but our government dislikes these films. At one time, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa mentioned at a meeting that films from other countries portray their soldiers in a positive light. He cited Indian films as an example, where they depict people dying with the Indian flag happily and showcase soldiers as heroes. In contrast, our films portray soldiers going to sex working places. The government wants to discourage these realistic films and introduce nationalistic propaganda films to Sri Lanka. Therefore, they encourage the production of nationalistic and historical films.

Many filmmakers have also started making these types of propaganda films. During the war, when we addressed war issues, the government imposed regulations and hatred, thinking that realistic films would no longer be considered. After the war, President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced that there are no Sinhala-Tamil nationals; everyone's the same. However, he always conveys to Tamil people that they lost the war and are losers. At that time, there was an opportunity for reconciliation, but it did not happen. Tamil people only asked for living rights like normal people. However, the government always emphasizes celebrating the victory of the war and constantly reminds them that they failed in the war. Especially culturally, through movies and every kind of work, they promote this mindset. In the minds of Tamil people, they are physically and mentally wounded, and nothing is done to heal their pain.

In Dostoevsky's story, a man believes he is doing everything in love, yet he cannot understand what she needs. She needs love, but he cannot comprehend that love and is

Prasanna
Vithanage

unable to express it. I feel a similarity between this story and the country. In this story, the man cannot think about her perspective and never understands her feelings. The government also fails to understand the needs and feelings of Tamil people, as well as the wounds they carry. We cannot simply say we should forget the past and live happily. It's unfair, so I created the metaphor in this story. Additionally, there are no weapons in this love story. I thought I could shoot this film and express my perspective. As an artist, I have a responsibility to my society, and I have to show what is happening in people's lives.

After the festival success, I tried to release the film in Sri Lanka, but the censor board asked me to cut certain scenes. I didn't agree, so I was unable to release the film. Later, the government changed, and a new censor board took over, approving the film. Consequently, I released it in theaters.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

Silence in the Courts (2015) stands out as the most controversial film in the country, and notably, it's your only documentary. What motivated you to create this film, and can you elaborate on the reasons behind choosing the documentary format for this particular subject matter?

Prasanna
Vithanage

Rahul Roy from India gave me an invitation to make a documentary about masculinity. They were planning to create five documentaries, and invited me to contribute one. However, I suggested making a feature film. After that idea, I started *With You, Without You*. Later, Rahul invited me again and told me that this time, I should make a documentary. So, I decided to create a documentary about various institutions, particularly social justice organizations built for the people. Despite their purpose, they often exploit people's rights, leading to suffering and injustice. During such times, where can people go to express their grievances? The answer is the court and judicial system. People turn to the government, people turn to each other, and everyone believes that's the only place to seek justice. I witnessed what happened inside the court, and the main person involved even sent me an injunction order. That was a violation of rights, but we refused it and released the film.

A Sri Lankan documentary was released in theaters for the first time, with numerous screenings. Additionally, I uploaded it to YouTube, and millions of people watched it. This documentary demonstrates the power of filmmaking. However, I faced another legal case related to this issue, and it is still ongoing. I am not the first person to tell this story to the world. Victor Ivan exposed the injustice, and I reconstructed the incident as he published it in a book.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

Her. Him. The Other (2018) is a tri-segmented anthology film, with you directing a segment focused on a Northern Tamil filmmaker's story. Can you share the motivations and reasons behind your involvement in this collaborative project alongside award-winning Sri Lankan filmmakers Asoka Handagama and Vimukthi Jayasundara?

Prasanna
Vithanage

Former President Chandrika Bandaranayake called us for a film project meeting separately for making movies about reconciliation. Later, I suggested that we could create a single film with three different stories. After that, we had another meeting and decided to make a film about the post-war situation. After the war ended, one day Northern Tamil Director Kesavarajan called me and shared his story. In Sri Lanka, I

Prasanna
Vithanage

observed that Northern East Tamils, Upcountry Plantation Tamils, Colombo Tamils, and all Tamil people had limited opportunities to connect with cinema or very few chances. So, I thought I had to tell this Tamil story. I went to Jaffna, met him, discussed the script, and believed he should act that character. Only the character of Director Ashoka Hanthakama is fictional. We took the real story, and the part involving the search for the women is fictionalized. I genuinely wanted to give a chance for Northern people to tell their story. Right from the beginning, I got this chance, and at that time, I directly told the former President to give a chance to Tamil filmmakers. However, they told me they would give chances to Tamil directors after this movie, which never happened. We always claim this is Sri Lankan cinema, but it is still Sinhala cinema because only Sinhala filmmakers get opportunities to make films. If it is Sri Lankan cinema, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, and people of every kind should have the chance to make films.

This film was released at Locarno, and later, we traveled all over Sri Lanka for screening the film. Funders conducted discussions about reconciliation with people during those screenings. Actually, they funded it to show reconciliation in Sri Lanka. However, we three made this film to show the world and the country that there is no reconciliation in Sri Lanka. People may have hope, but in reality, there is no reconciliation, and as artists, we are here to openly show it.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

In the context of the Sri Lankan government funding Sinhala historical narratives and producing propaganda films, your decision to invest significantly in producing a historical film like Children of the Sun (2019) stands out. Can you elaborate on the motivations behind creating this film and how it was strategically crafted to counteract the government's propaganda efforts? Additionally, we would like to know the film's budget and success, as it is a high-budget film in Sri Lanka.

Prasanna
Vithanage

This story speaks about identity. During that time, every historical film was made to portray the pride of the kingdom, race, and religion as our identity. However, this is not our true identity. Humanity, love, and kindness are the real identifiers, not our religion and race. I want to convey this message, so I created this historical world. After the failure of socialism, people began to believe in religion, and every form of nationalism ended with violence. Sinhala nationalism, Tamil nationalism, and Muslim nationalism all concluded with violence.

Normally, Buddhists are portrayed with Dharmachakra on their vehicles, Muslims wear Abaya dresses, and Christians wear cross chains. The film questions why people try to showcase their religion as their identity. While we can criticize that, we also need to consider the beliefs that drive such behavior. On the surface, it may seem like a love story, but beneath the narrative lies a profound question.

We won the HBF script development fund and were selected for Busan APM. Later, we found a local producer, and Rajiv Ravi introduced us to the Indian independent film company, Jar Pictures. We started the movie, which was a 100 million SLR project. Despite facing heavy rain and numerous climate problems, the film was successfully released at many festivals. After the economic crisis in January 2023, it was released and ran successfully for 98 days.

Bavaneedha
Loganathan

The new generation of Sri Lankan cinema faces challenges in finding its footing amid the country's uneven political and economic landscape and limited opportunities. Considering the current environment, especially for Tamil filmmakers who constitute a minority, what vision do you have for the future of Sri Lankan cinema? And is there a message or advice you would like to convey to the aspiring filmmakers of the new generation?

Prasanna
Vithanage

There are no film schools for the younger generation in Sri Lanka. In every country, especially Europe, the government helps to make films. India has numerous platforms for filmmakers, but in Sri Lanka, there are no funds and opportunities. Every door seems closed, hindering how our filmmakers enter the industry. Television, too, expects the same type of stories, lacking a creative medium. The absence of creative ability means that if we have creativity, it will be stifled. Consequently, there are no film schools, no television opportunities, and even if we create a film, there is no place to showcase it due to the poor distribution system in Sri Lanka. It's a locked situation.

In 2017, we submitted a report to join the industry, but nothing materialized. Young filmmakers from the north and south have different lifestyles. Many Tamil filmmakers attempt to create South Indian films, hoping to enter the South Indian film industry. However, as they are not the majority, they are striving to go there. The government needs to affirm that our cultural identity is Sri Lanka and provide the freedom to tell our stories. Unfortunately, there is a lack of commitment to freedom. Currently, diaspora cinema has the freedom to tell their stories, leading them to create films.

I have no expectations, but I have a request: study cinema sincerely, understand the craft, and broaden your knowledge. Individually build your expertise, and collectively, we need to create a national policy that includes people of every race in cinema, shaping a new future.

2023 AFiS Interview Collection :

Interviews with 18 Asian Film Professionals

by **Bavaneedha Loganathan**, a self-taught independent filmmaker, shines brightly on the global film stage. Her journey has taken her to international platforms, including the Berlinale Talents 2020, Global Media Makers, Asia Pacific Screen Lab, London PSVI Film Festival, Busan Asian Film School, BIFAN Fantastic Film School, WME Dhaka Script Lab, and Qalambaaz Script Lab. With a deep connection to cinema, she explores the human experience, amplifying women's voices in her work. Her talent has garnered international recognition and awards for her short films. She proudly stands as the first woman filmmaker from the underrepresented Plantation Tamil community, making her a prominent BIPOC woman filmmaker in Sri Lanka. Her role as a pioneering woman filmmaker consistently representing Sri Lanka's cinema on prestigious global platforms underscores her impact on the industry's new wave. With a background in producing over 1000+ TV shows, she seamlessly transitioned to filmmaking after a stint as an agency producer and writer in advertising. She founded the production company Big Eyes Cinemas, which serves as a platform for minority voices, winning several grants locally and internationally and creating impactful works in films and comics. Bavaneedha is currently developing four feature films: *46 Mondays*, *Kuttu*, *Watermelon Girl*, and *How Much?* Each has earned recognition in prestigious screenwriting labs, residencies, grants, and producing labs. *Kuttu* is the first 2D animation feature in Sri Lanka, and *How Much?* is the first Tamil independent co-production film between South India and Sri Lanka. She is also a National Award-winning TV host, graphic novel writer, and voice actress.





LY THAI DUNG

Cinematographer / People's Artist

Vietnam

Interview by NGUYEN Hong Quan



In 1986, after graduating from Hanoi Academy of Theater and Cinema, cinematographer Ly Thai Dung went to work at the Central Scientific Documentary Studio, then Secofilm. From 1993 to May 2016, he worked at Vietnam Feature Film Studio. Currently, he is the Dean of the Film Department at Hanoi Academy of Theater and Cinema. Ly Thai Dung has won many awards in his filming career such as the excellent cinematography award at the 13th Vietnam Film Festival (2001) with *Desolate Valley*, the 14th (2004) with the film *Neighbors*, the 15th (2007) with *Dance of Death*, and the 16th (2009) with *Adrift*. In 2010 he was also named among the top 5 nominees for best cinematography in Asia at the Asian Film Awards in Hong Kong with *Adrift*. In 2010 and 2015, he won the Golden Kite Award for Best Cinematography with the films *Adrift* and *Thau Chin in Siam* (2015). He was also the first Vietnamese cinematographer to film for the National Geographic channel, with the movie *Love Market in the Valley of the Clouds*. At the 2017 ASEAN International Film Festival he won Best Director of Photography (DOP) with the film *The Way Station* (2017).



Nguyen Hong
Quan
Ly Thai Dung

How did you first start in the industry?

My father is film director, Meritorious Artist Ly Thai Bao, director of the National Documentary and Scientific Film Studio. He and his colleagues often talked about work and careers at home, so I came to follow cinema as well. But I didn't become a director like my father, I worked as a cinematographer. That was also my father's advice. The fact that I later became a film teacher is also a family tradition. The school I work at now is partly the former Vietnam Cinema College, where my father used to be the Principal in the 1970s.

My father is a director who studied in the first course of Vietnamese cinema with famous directors such as Hai Ninh, Tran Vu, Bach Diep... He only directed two feature films, then switched to making feature documentaries and has held positions such as Principal of the Vietnam Theater and Cinema School, Director of the National Documentary and Scientific Film Studio, and General Secretary of the Vietnam Cinema Association. I am a person who likes machines, technology, and equipment, so my dream was to study machine manufacturing at Mechanical Engineering University. At that time, my father also said that it's up to you to choose, but the cinematography industry is very good, and very special because it is half the application of machinery, science, and technology but also requires half the qualities of an artist.

Actually, at that time I wanted to study directing because directors were more "powerful". But my father said that I was still too young, at only 18 years old, and that I should study cinematography instead. When I was mature enough and had enough experience, it would not be too late to study directing. But until now, after 30 years of working with cameras, I still have not lost my passion for filming. In the second year of college, when filming exercises began, I struggled with the script, camera equipment, huge lights, spending all night long in the studio... and in the cinema. But it gave me a truly enchanting feeling... That was also the time when I understood that cinematography was the path I had chosen and belonged to. My father passed away early, when I was 28 years old; at that time my father had only seen my graduation movie filmed a few years earlier. What comforted me was that my father was very happy because my movie was filmed in Cua Tung, Vinh Linh... which is also where my father made his graduation movie, 23 years earlier.

I am just like many other colleagues, after finishing school, I get a job. Perhaps our generation's career path is full of difficulties, hardships, and shortages like the country in those years. 1991 and 1992 were two important years for me. I was fortunate to be an apprentice to two famous French and Australian cinematographers on two long feature films shot in Vietnam: *Dien Bien Phu* (1992) and *Trap* (1994). At that time, I felt enough to understand what I could do.

Nguyen Hong
Quan
Ly Thai Dung

Why is filming so attractive to you?

It's because filming requires constant thinking and creativity. Scene after scene, movie after movie, no two movies are the same and there is no repetition. That job requires the worker to have a sharp look and to have a consistent visualization. The cinematographer must also be knowledgeable to be able to translate the language from literature into images, and together with the director, tell the story in the best way possible with images.

Nguyen Hong Quan

*It can be said that the movie *The Tale of the Colon* on which you collaborated with director Nguyen Khanh Du marked the beginning of your success on the path of professional filming. What is the reason for a veteran cinematographer and director like Nguyen Khanh Du to choose a young cameraman to cooperate with?*

Ly Thai Dung

Collaborating with a famous person like Nguyen Khanh Du was a great honor for me. I'm not sure why I was chosen, maybe because at that time I was a cinematographer for a youth film studio and *The Tale of the Colon* was a children's movie, but I found him very comfortable and confident when working with me. That year I wasn't too young anymore, I was 30 years old, and it was time to start being strong.

Nguyen Hong Quan

To date, you have filmed more than 20 feature films with all kinds of topics from war films, and socio-psychological films to horror films. For you, what kind of movie gives you the greatest challenge?

Ly Thai Dung

Actually, every movie for me is always a new challenge. It's different because it is done at different times, on different technological platforms, and with different financial terms, so the challenges are also different. I also add that there is no place where the burden of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the cameraman in the filmmaking process as much as in Vietnam. That's because the system of equipment, technology and people supporting the main cameraman in Vietnam is very limited. People are still used to the idea that only "one person, one camera" can make a movie. When abroad, this number is at least ten times higher.

Nguyen Hong Quan

The cameraman is always the one standing at the "head of the storm", especially in filming war movies, the cameraman often has to be in very dangerous positions. With the war movies you have made, have you ever encountered imminent danger?

Ly Thai Dung

In general, making war films in Vietnam is still very manual and dangerous, especially in shooting scenes related to creating visual effects, with shooting guns, fires, bombs exploding... In 1997, when I agreed to make the movie *Dong Loc Junction* (1997) at the real historical location, it was already dangerous, because underground there could still be many unexploded bombs and mines. But for historical and spiritual reasons, the film crew still decided to film right there with the active support of military engineers. In movies like *The Legend Makers* (2013) or the TV series *Road to Dien Bien* (2015) ... when creating scenes of bomb explosions, we had to bury materials such as bread, and styrofoam... so that when the bomb explodes, it will have less impact on the actors and cameramen, but it is still normal to get rocks and dirt thrown at your face and body. Fortunately, no unfortunate accidents have occurred.

Nguyen Hong Quan

*Among the films you have made are *Desolate Valley* (2001) and *Mother's Soul* (2011) by female director, People's Artist Nhue Giang. Working with one of the few female film directors in Vietnam, did you find anything different compared to working with male colleagues?*

Ly Thai Dung

For a director, in my opinion, the most important quality is determination. Director Nhue Giang is a woman, and she is also a very determined person, she follows things to the end

Ly Thai Dung

and does what she desires and is passionate about. For me, what's special about director, People's Artist Nhue Giang is probably the topics she chose. She has great sharing and sympathy for women and children. *Desolate Valley* is a very interesting movie. For many years now, every November 20, provincial television stations have re-aired this film as a way to share and deeply sympathize with teachers in the highlands.

Nguyen Hong Quan

*For you, surely during the process of making *Desolate Valley* (2001) there were many memories and unique experiences?*

Ly Thai Dung

Imagine yourself in a valley early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when fog fills the valley. When ethnic children finish school, they only walk about 10 meters, their images are hidden in the fog, no longer visible. But the sounds of footsteps and laughter still linger forever, along with the sound of a gurgling stream, the sound of wild birds, the sound of rattles, the sound of mortars pounding rice... Sounds that do not go along with that image always create excitement, and makes the listener especially curious about where that sound comes from and where it hides. Those sounds evoke sharing and sympathy, but at the same time, they also create terrible loneliness. In the sea of clouds, people become so small, because every time they step out of their house, they sink into the clouds. In my opinion, *Desolate Valley* is an unforgettable film for those who have participated in making it.

Nguyen Hong Quan

There are two switches in the cameraman's head, one for romance, and one for precision and discipline.

Ly Thai Dung

That's right, emotions are emotions, but if you're not good at technique, career, or technology, you'll fail 9 times out of 10. But if there is only technique, the product is beautiful and true, but cold and lacking in emotion. These two things must be very balanced, both in life and work. But to be honest, I also have romantic ideas that sometimes when I say them to my friends, they tell me I'm crazy. Every time I watch the Oscars, I keep imagining that one day a Vietnamese person will be awarded this award. In 2010, I was nominated at the Asian Film Awards. This was a great honor. It helped me calm down, shape myself, and understand that I was on the right path.

Becoming a cinematographer, and being able to leave a mark, is certainly not easy. For me, every profession is the same, but cinema is probably in the group of more difficult professions, with all the creative components. When working, I always try my best in each film. I was determined to be dedicated to it because there was no chance to correct my mistakes. My goal is professionalism and doing my best. Each movie has different stories, and different directors... the goal is to please the director the most. As for the teaching profession, at the end of a class session... my goal is to see the joyful eyes of the students.

When I won many domestic and international awards, as a cinematographer I was happy, but not too happy because I always understood my position. In 2010, I received a nomination for Best Cinematographer at the 4th Asian Film Awards in Hong Kong for the movie *Adrift* (2009).

Being among the top five Asian cinematographers that year was a great honor for my career. I'm very proud, but after watching their films, I know I and we still have to work

Ly Thai Dung

hard. The cinema needs to be synchronized at every stage. As for domestic awards, it's fun, the prize money is almost enough to satisfy friends and colleagues.

My cinema journey has lasted 40 years, since I was a student, with about 22 movies and more than 300 episodes of television series and documentaries. Each film is a mark on both my professional and personal life. A lot is going on. I cherish everything, not placing too much importance on any period. Perhaps the above numbers are a general impression, but I want the above numbers to not stop there. As of 2023, I am very happy to have participated in 23 bachelor's training courses in all three majors: Screenwriting, Cinematography, Film and Television Directing.

The last three films I shot, including *Father and Son* (2017), *The Way Station* (2017), and *Soldiers* (2021), are all collaborations with young directors making their first films. I have learned a lot from them and firmly believe that they will be more successful than our generation. After the movie, they still consider me a friend.

In the past two years, due to COVID-19, in part, the market share of films suitable for me was not large, so I focused on my work at the Film Department, Hanoi Academy of Theater and Cinema.

Nguyen Hong Quan

Thank you People's Artist Ly Thai Dung.

by

Nguyen Hong Quan (quan.nguyenhong0207@gmail.com) is a director-producer from Hanoi, Vietnam.

From 2016 to 2018, he received a full scholarship to study with The DOC NOMADS Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) – a master program in Documentary

Directing in three of the top universities in Hungary, Portugal, and Belgium. He is currently a lecturer at the Hanoi Academy of Theater and Cinema and producing his first feature-length film.

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Busan Asian Film School

521, Suyeong-ro, Suyeong-gu, Busan, Korea (48262)

Tel. 051-750-3204 | Fax 051-750-3200

