

# Singapore Cinema:

*Spotlight on Short Film Production*

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Royston Tan's *15*.

## Film in Singapore

Among Asian film-producing countries, Singapore is a relative newcomer that has yet to find its place in the world's filmmaking establishment. This is not surprising, as the indigenous film production in the city-state staged a comeback from two decades of dormancy only in the early 1990s and the total number of features produced since then is less than forty. Nonetheless, Singapore's recent achievements in feature and especially short film production are beginning to draw international attention.<sup>1</sup> In fact, short films have significantly contributed to the development of Singapore cinema as a whole.

Since its modest beginnings in the 1930s, Singapore cinema has developed as a cooperative, multi-ethnic and multicultural endeavor, reflecting the city's mixed population.<sup>2</sup> After World War II, local production – then almost exclusively in the Malay-language – experienced an unusually fertile creative period spanning the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, which has come to be

regarded as its golden age.

Two large companies Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris dominated the city's movie industry. Much of its success and glory was owed to a single individual: the multi-talented P. Ramlee (1929-73). Actor, director, singer, composer, writer, producer, editor, and publisher rolled into one, this "Malay Chaplin" was adored by his audiences and is today a local popular legend with a considerable cult following, especially in neighboring Malaysia. After the closure of the Shaw and Cathay studios in the late 1960s and early 1970s respectively, followed by a few isolated filmmaking attempts in the 1970s, film production in Singapore<sup>3</sup> ceased for almost twenty years.

Starting in the final decade of the twentieth century, a wave of new films ushered in the beginning of Singapore's film revival. This began in 1991 with an unremarkable feature, *Medium Rare* (Arthur Smith). In 1995, the box-office success of *Bugis Street* (Yonfan) and the critical acclaim of *Mee Pok Man*, a psychological drama by Eric Khoo,

encouraged Cathay to produce the comedy *Army Daze* (Ong Keng Sen, 1996). The next year saw the release of three local films, including Khoo's seminal *12 Storeys*, followed by four more in 1998.

The roots of this revival can be traced to a number of important economic, social, and cultural factors in the country's infrastructure. They include several decades of relentless groundwork by the Singapore Film Society, the establishment of the Singapore International Film Festival in 1987, a gradual relaxation of censorship and the establishment of centers of post-secondary film education. Last but not least, shifts in the government's strategy meant a more benevolent and supportive attitude towards the arts in general.

Since 1991, almost all the features made in Singapore have been thematically anchored in the present. Malay-language features dominant in the golden age period have disappeared. In tune with the Republic's population profile and center of power, the new generation of filmmakers has refocused on the city's Chinese community. The language of choice is now English, Mandarin and Singlish (vernacular English heavily influenced by Chinese dialects and Malay). From the generic point of view, the majority of the revival movies have been action-oriented comedies and farces, reflecting the problems of everyday life.

As the local output jumped to a total of sixteen features between 1996-99, with half of these produced in the last year of the decade, the reigning atmosphere of uncertainty gave way to high-flying optimism, if not outright euphoria. This remarkable period produced box-office successes such as the enormously popular farce *Money No Enough* (Tay Teck Lock, 1998) and *Liang Po Po—The Movie* (Teng Bee Lian, 1999). It also brought artistic achievements, especially Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997) about subtle forms of repression, and Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* (1999), an imaginative teenage motorbike and kung fu tragicomedy.

The end of the 1990s also saw the establishment of the Singapore Film

Commission (SFC) in 1998.<sup>4</sup> This was considered a major step forward in the development of the national film industry. By launching the Commission, the government indicated its support for local film production and other creative, educational, and intellectual activities in the motion pictures arena.

The new millennium brought a kind of hangover, a sobering-up period during which the true possibilities and limitations of the production in a small city-state were reviewed and assessed more realistically. Hopes were raised again in 2002 with the emergence of *I Not Stupid*. This intelligent satirical comedy offered good laughs while critically addressing serious problems in Singapore's education system; the movie struck a nerve and did extremely well at the box-office. The multi-talented Jack Neo, the film's director and star who is also a popular television personality, may be seen as the Chinese successor to Malay cinema's P. Ramlee.

In this most recent period, Singapore's production has stabilized between four to six features annually. Out of the assortment of small "part-time" independent production houses emerged Raintree Pictures, a movie production arm set up by the state-controlled Media Corporation of Singapore in 1998, which has assumed dominance in the city's film activities through its steady output and funding. Raintree Pictures aims to make films that would appeal to both Asian and international markets and is keenly involved in co-productions. Recent examples include *The Eye* (2002, Thai/Hong Kong/Singapore/UK), *Turn Left, Turn Right* (2003, Warner Bros Pictures' first Chinese language film produced with Singapore and Hong Kong) and *Infernal Affairs II* (2003, Singapore/Hong Kong).

Making movies in Singapore has always been a bigger challenge than in many other countries. The city-state is a small island<sup>5</sup> with a population of four million and no natural landscape to speak of. Moreover, the country has a very short history and has not yet fully developed its own national identity

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and culture. The tiny population size makes it very difficult for even an inexpensive motion picture to recover the investment through a domestic release. The development of a wider film production base has also been burdened by tight censorship. Fortunately, the censor's grip appears to be slowly relaxing; too slowly, many would say, but nevertheless there is a movement in the right direction. Still, feature filmmaking in Singapore remains very small in size and scope.

### Support for Shorts

If the difficulties of making feature films faced by established producers and directors in Singapore seem great, they are formidable when encountered by film students, fresh graduates and other aspiring film artists. Not surprisingly, as many have done before them, the younger generations of filmmakers, mostly in their twenties and thirties, have turned to the short format to realize their ideas and express themselves. At present, up to eighty shorts are produced each year, mostly by film students.

Aesthetically and artistically, the short film is not inferior to the feature-length format. Historically, however, it has been put at a disadvantage by the relatively low resolution of 16mm and 8mm film stock and lack of distribution opportunities. In recent years, new alternatives have emerged, particularly as a result of technological advances, such as digital video (DV) and the Internet. DV has brought dramatically reduced costs and significantly improved image and sound quality, while the high-speed Internet allows for the bypassing of traditional distribution channels. As in other countries, Singapore's young filmmakers appear to have embraced this new technology.

The importance of the short film in Singapore cannot be overestimated, as some of the most interesting productions coming from this country are shorts. As the short is not a format used for general commercial release, it is less subject to censorship control and therefore allows for greater

artistic freedom and experimentation, an advantage especially important in tightly controlled Singapore. It has also become a relatively affordable training ground for the enthusiastic young men and women who will become the country's next generation of feature filmmakers.

The rise to prominence of Singapore's short film production in the last five years is the result of a number of developments, which include government financial support to young filmmakers through the Singapore Film Commission,<sup>6</sup> and the platform provided to short film by the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) which also includes a short film competition for local entries. The School of Film, Sound and Video at the Ngee Ann Polytechnic is a hotbed of short film production whose students and graduates score regularly at international competitions.<sup>7</sup> This respected institution and the Substation arts centre have played a significant role in nurturing the short film evolution in the city.

The Substation (founded 1990) is Singapore's "first multicultural and multi-disciplinary arts centre" for the performing and visual arts, music and film. From 2000 onwards, the Substation's focus on film intensified. Moving Images, the Substation's film & video program<sup>8</sup>, offers year-round screenings and other events in the center's modest 100-seat theater. In particular, the place has developed into a hub for short-film activities, attracting students and people from the film industry. Its organizers appear to have understood the significance of the short film as a foundation for future feature production and as a launching pad for younger filmmakers. In fact many Singapore feature directors including Eric Khoo, Lim Suat Yen (*The Road Less Travelled*, 1997) and Cheah Chee Kong (*Chicken Rice War*, 2000) began their careers by winning recognition for their shorts.

The Substation's annual Singapore Shorts Film Festival (SSFF), launched in 2001, is the only international short film competition in the city. It offers a wide platform to filmmakers from Singapore and abroad to

present, compare and discuss their work. In addition, the Substation has helped to promote Singapore short films overseas by bringing them to international festivals, such as to the 6<sup>th</sup> Thai International Short Film Festival and the 2002 Slam Dunk Cannes (which runs alongside the Cannes Film Festival).

### Short and Successful

The quality of Singapore shorts is steadily improving and their makers are finding increasing financial support. Other than the grants from the Singapore Film Commission, the National Geographic Channels International and Discovery Networks Asia have each set up joint production funds with the Singapore Economic Development Board to cultivate film talents in the Asian region and to commission new documentaries for their programs. Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House* (2001), for example, was a Discovery Channel project. The thirty minute documentary explores the impact of urbanization on traditional culture through the experience of a Taoist family whose deceased must be exhumed to make way for residential development. The film won a 2002 Student Academy Award from the United States Academy of Arts and Sciences.

One of the earlier successes was Eric Khoo's animated short film, *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990), which won five awards at the Singapore Video Competition and became the first of local short films to travel to festivals abroad. His 1992 short *Carcass* became the blueprint for *Mee Pok Man*. However, the short that brought Khoo notoriety at home and abroad was *Pain* (1994), a graphic portrait of a sado-masochistic young man's obsession. The film won the Best Director and Special Achievement Awards at the 1994 SIFF but was banned from public exhibition for its portrayal of brutality and torture. The ban on *Pain* remained until 1998 when it was screened at the 11<sup>th</sup> SIFF.

In 1999 Tan Kai Syng's ten minute experimental *All Change!!!* won Third Prize in the Experimental Video Category at the 42<sup>nd</sup>

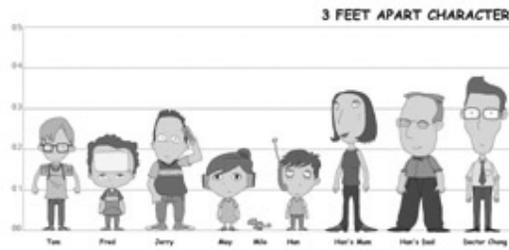
San Francisco International Film Festival's Golden Gate Awards while *Gourmet Baby*, an ironic comment on pleasure and obsession, made by Sandi Tan, premiered at the 39<sup>th</sup> New York Film Festival. In 2001, Colin Goh's humorous digital short about loansharks *eAhLong.com* won the Special Achievement Award at the 14<sup>th</sup> SIFF and became the source of *TalkingCock The Movie* (Colin Goh and Joyceln Woo, 2002), a satirical comedy inspired by their popular website.

What follows are examples of prize-winning shorts made in the past two years. They extend over a wide range of styles, techniques, and subjects through both fiction and documentary, from reflections on personal experiences to engaged cultural, social, and political commentary. Royston Tan's *15*, one of the best shorts ever made in Singapore, now turned into a critically acclaimed feature-length film, is discussed in more detail.

*The Secret Heaven* (2002, 16min) by the freelance film and television director Sun Koh is a succinct critical comment on excessive parental pressure on young children to become top achievers, a theme which was also the focus of Jack Neo's feature *I Not Stupid* and Ellery Ngiam's short *Crammed* (2003, 11min). The over-burdening of children pushed to the limits of endurance by competitive-minded parents is a very tangible problem in the country, which has led to a rising number of child suicides. *The Secret Heaven* won the Silver Hugo Award at the 2002 Chicago IFF, the Best Director prize at 2002 Singapore International Film Festival, People's Choice for Best Short Film, 5<sup>th</sup> Women's Film Festival in Seoul and *Prix du public du meilleur court métrage 2002* at the 8<sup>e</sup> Festival Etoiles & Toiles d'Asie in Lyon, France.

Gavin Chelvan, Siau Che Sheng and Billy Tan produced *Radio Station Forgot To Play My Favourite Song* (2003, 20min) as a final-year project in the School of Communication and Information in Nanyang Technological University. The three filmmakers have created an engaging documentary on the vibrant rock production in Singapore while lambasting its

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*3 Feet Apart* by Jason Lai.

neglect by the local radio stations. The short was featured at the New York Expo (December 13-14, 2003) and awarded Singapore's Media Development Authority Book Prize for Best Documentary in 2003.

*The Ground I Stand (Di Mana Bumi Dipijak, 2002, 25min)* is a captivating and philosophically profound documentary by Malaysian-born Sherman Ong. Entirely composed of the personal recollections of a simple septuagenarian Singaporean Malay (Muslim) woman, Ong's film successfully brings out her down-to-earth personality, tenacity and wisdom. Her anecdotal stories provide a valuable oral account of Singapore's history. The film received the Gold Award for Best Documentary at the 7<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Video Awards in 2002. Ong graduated from the National University of Singapore and is presently a freelance professional in both photography and filmmaking. The European House of Photography in Paris recently selected his photography work in 2004. His latest short film, *Exodus (Wanita Yang Berlari)*, a dance drama set in Java about the sexual awakening of two women, was chosen to premiere at the 2004 International Film Festival Rotterdam.

Singapore short filmmakers are also addressing social issues neglected by the government and virtually ignored by the media. Elgin Ho's *Foreign Dreams* (2002, 8min), based on an actual letter written by a Tamil construction worker in Singapore to his wife, comments on the poor living conditions and hardships of foreign workers in Singapore. Similar concerns are expressed in Han Yew Kwang's *The Call Home* (2001, 30min), which won the Best Short Film prize at the 2002 Singapore IFF.

*3 Feet Apart* (animated, 2003, 6min) by Jason Lai is an example of an original perspective on the impact of technology on human life. In this delightful and quirky animation, a boy born with a cellular phone attached to his head is in love with a girl born with headphones in her ears. When they come closer than three feet of each other, their gadgets interfere, and so they are forced to stay apart. Lai began as a producer for an independent Singapore feature film, *The Road Less Travelled*. He is currently the creative director of Oak 3 Films which he co-founded. *3 Feet Apart* was awarded the Best Animation prize in the Asian Short Film category at the Bangkok International Film Festival, 2004.

Yong Mun Chee recently won the Directors Guild of America's Student Award for her 2003 short *9:30*, about a young man's futile attempt to forget his love. The short also received Best Film in the experimental category at the 1<sup>st</sup> US-ASEAN Film, Video and Photography Festival 2003, in Washington, DC. Mun Chee made the film in the course of her studies for a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California.

Other filmmakers of note include Leonard Yip whose tale of friendship and jealousy, *L'envie/The Desire*, competed at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2003. Bertrand Lee's R(A)rated<sup>9</sup> *La Conquista* won the Silver prize at the 35<sup>th</sup> Worldfest - Houston International Film Festival in 2002. Wee Li Lin is a prolific short filmmaker whose prize-winning works include *Homemaker* (2002) and *Autograph Book* (2003).

### **Royston Tan's 15** **15 (short version, 2002, 25min)**

One of the most significant short films produced in Singapore is *15* by Royston Tan. When the film was made, the twenty-six year-old Tan was already one of the most recognized names in short filmmaking in Singapore. Already then he had some fifteen titles and many international awards to his credit, most notably for *Sons* (2000), a poetic meditation on the relationship between a



Royston Tan's *15*.

son and his father. In 2001 he was voted the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) Director of the Year (Silver Award) at the 6<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Video Awards and in 2002 the Singapore National Arts Council named him Young Artist of the Year.

*15* was shot mostly on 16mm with certain scenes on video, in Mandarin and Chinese dialects (with English subtitles). The short is a bold and compelling revelation of the emotional, psychological and physical lives of three actual fifteen-year-old delinquents playing themselves. According to the director, most of the incidents in the film had happened in the past or were happening at the time the short was being made. Melvin Chen, Vynn Soh and Shaun Tan are school truants and dropouts from dysfunctional backgrounds who manifest their sense of alienation by joining secret societies, engaging in gang fights and petty theft, having their bodies tattooed and pierced, blasting out techno music, watching taped pornography (illegal in Singapore) and practicing for a Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) rap competition with lyrics that mock the national anthem. Like Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, *15* reveals a layer of outcasts and misfits whose existence is usually hidden under the veneer of an affluent society and the zealotry of the authorities who glorify only the country's successes.

The boys' lives unfold in an amalgam of documentary and fiction in an experimental, episodic narrative that eschews plot for evocative sequences. We get to know them

not so much through external events but by seeing how they interact with each other and by listening in on their conversations. Director Tan employs an intriguing combination of lyrical, dreamlike stills suggestive of interior landscapes of alienation, loneliness and melancholy, as well as using the trappings of youth culture such as the energetic MTV-style shots that show off the boys' talents for Hokkien-rapping and a fighting scene portrayed as a computer game. The highly stylized imagery is finely balanced against surprisingly natural performances, rare for a Singapore film. According to the director, this was achieved by making the actors forget the camera so that "even when they go to sleep and eat we have the camera on."<sup>10</sup>

During filming, the boys' responses were sometimes unanticipated. In one instance, one of the boys unexpectedly broke down and started to cry and talked about wanting a birthday cake from his grandmother. According to Tan, "we just changed our schedule and filmed that scene. And he couldn't stop crying, after two hours."<sup>11</sup>

Tan portrays the youngsters' tough street-smart exterior and exposes their inner vulnerabilities, the intimacy of male bonding, the power and fragility of their friendship. The result is a bleak, grim, unsentimental portrait of the boys with few illusions as to where they might be heading. With honesty and understanding rendered in a style both poetic and down-to-earth, the filmmaker seeks not to exonerate the self-destructiveness

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and aimless existence of the teenagers but to give these kids, often rejected by their families and forgotten by society, a face and a voice.

For this short, censorship was not much of an issue, as the Singapore authorities tend to be stricter when it comes to feature films. The problem, rather, was money and moral support. Director Tan had received several grants from the Singapore Film Commission in the past but in the case of *15*, the grant was refused. The reason, Tan was told, was because "they didn't understand my script."<sup>12</sup> Convinced that this was an important film to make, Tan financed the film using all his savings.

The idea for the movie was conceived after Tan befriended one of the film's future protagonists at a school where he was giving a talk on filmmaking and was introduced to the boy's circle of friends. He:

Realized that there were so many things that were misunderstood about them. So I thought it was time for me to present it on film, show it to people, especially to Singaporeans.<sup>13</sup>

Tan saw them not merely as problematic teens, but "kids with a lot of soul and a lot of heart."<sup>14</sup> He found he could relate to them: "...I think this is a film that is not only about them but about me too."<sup>15</sup> Tan admitted that the main reason for making *15* was the need to hold up a mirror for his young friends in the hopes that they might see themselves and the lives they lead more clearly. In fact, he could not show many things they did because of potential problems with the law:

When I first saw them I told myself, they must see the other side of life, not just the environment they are in, fighting people and snatching territories and things like that... After this film they got pretty much exposed to short filmmaking, so they are attending film screenings with me now. What I like about them is that they are slowly moving away from the lifestyle that they are in.<sup>16</sup>

*15* is probably Royston Tan's most accomplished short to date. Like *Sons*, it has

been invited to numerous festivals such as the Pusan International Film Festival in Korea, the Stockholm International Film Festival in Sweden, and the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival in France. It won well-deserved accolades including the Special Achievement Award for the Best Singapore Short Film at the 15<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival in 2002; the Best International Short Film at the 5<sup>th</sup> Bangkok Short Film & Video Festival 2002; the Asian New Force 2002 Critics Awards given by the Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards; the Best Fiction Prize at the Tampere Film Festival and a Special Jury Mention at the Oberhausen International Film Festival 2003.

### **Royston Tan's *15*** ***15* (feature version, 2003, 90min)**

The success of the short prompted the director to stretch it into his first feature film: the ninety minute version of *15* was produced by filmmaker Eric Khoo for under S\$200,000 (US\$117,000), with a S\$50,000 (US\$30,000) grant from the SFC. The original short, re-edited and given a new soundtrack became the first part of the new feature. Two new characters were introduced and additional scenes shot for the second part. The feature also went further in explicitly portraying controversial scenes such as a close-up of an erect penis, drug taking, self-mutilation and the suicide of young people.

The feature's advantage was that it reached a much wider audience but the compact short remains the more powerful film artistically. On the whole, however, both versions of *15* are important for their honest and revealing social commentary and confirm Royston Tan as a distinctive voice in Singapore cinema.

*15* (the feature) premiered at the Singapore International Film Festival in April 2003 where all 1,200 seats for its single screening were sold out in four days. It was passed without cuts and given an R(A) rating for the festival screening only.<sup>17</sup> After the Festival, the feature was sent to the Board of Film Censors again to obtain clearance for its theatrical release. The

censors initially wanted to cut twenty-five minutes from various parts of the movie but after lengthy deliberation announced that it would be rated R(A) with cuts totaling less than five minutes. These changes included sound dubbing of scenes containing actual songs of and the editing out of the locations used by secret societies. This was on the advice of the police who pointed out that fights between rival gangs had been provoked in public spaces by the singing of such songs. Tan's feature won the NETPAC/ FIPRESCI Award<sup>18</sup> at the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) in 2003. It competed at the Venice Film Festival in 2003 and was shown at a number of international festivals including the First Paris Asian Film Festival in 2004.

Royston Tan has already completed two new shorts – a documentary *The Old Man*

and *the River and Cut*, a take on censorship. He is another example of the importance of the short film experience for launching a professional film career. Even more importantly, the economical and flexible short medium has enabled Singapore film artists to cast new light on their country's reality and present it to audiences at home and abroad – the latter often knowing Singapore only as a place of sterile cleanliness, caning, fines and no chewing gum.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The first Paris Asian Film Festival (Rencontres du cinéma Asiatique de Paris), held in the city's new 14-screen arthouse cineplex MK2 Bibliotheque from March 25 to April 5 2004, screened seven Singapore features and eight shorts.

<sup>2</sup>In 2000, Singapore's ethnic profile was Chinese (77%), Malay (14%) and Indian (8%).

<sup>3</sup>The city became an independent Republic in 1965.

<sup>4</sup>From January 1, 2003, a new statutory board, known as the Media Development Authority (MDA), was created, which merged the Films and Publications department (censorship office), the Singapore Broadcasting Authority and the Singapore Film Commission.

<sup>5</sup>630 sq km or 243 sq miles.

<sup>6</sup>The SFC finances up to 40 shorts each year at an average of S\$5000 (US\$3000) each.

<sup>7</sup>Among them are filmmakers included in this article, such as Leonard Yip, Sherman Ong, Sun Koh, Jason Lai, Bertrand Lee, and Han Yew Kwang.

<sup>8</sup>While the main staple of Moving Images programmes are film and video screenings year-round, Moving Images is also committed to cultivating the film community with film-related talks, workshops and seminars. The primary focus of Moving Images is to integrate its programme with the film community in Singapore.

<sup>9</sup>R(A), or Restricted Artistic classification restricted admission to those 21 years and above. In 2004, it was replaced with a new classification, R21, dropping the requirement of the unspecified "artistic merit."

<sup>10</sup>Ben Slater, "Boy's Own," *BigO* (August 2002): 200, 41.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>17</sup>Actually, the tickets' release was delayed by a week as the print was held up by the censors while discussing the film's rating.

<sup>18</sup>Since 1997 at the SIFF, the jury of the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC) has worked together with the jury of the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI).

