

# My Snapshot of Singapore Film History

By Jane Peterson

I got interested in the history of Singapore film because of my dog. Our walks to the Singapore Botanic Gardens wind up in the open-air café and that's where I met Mr. VM Shaw, one of Singapore's Golden Age producers. He's the son of Sir Run Run Shaw who came to Singapore in the 1920s. Run Run and his brother Runme were from a wealthy Shanghai merchant family. They started buying Singapore's silent film venues. Soon they began turning out a steady stream of Malay musical comedies starring the popular Malay star, P Ramlee. (*Those old black and whites feature prominently in the National Museum's permanent film exhibit.*)

My friend VM remembers actors and directors coming for lunch. "My dad was very hands on," VM mused. "He was involved in all discussions. He was very careful." The Shaws' success ushered in Singapore's Golden Age in the late 1940s. It roared on for two decades, dominated by the Shaw studios and its competitor, Cathay. Malay films reflected Singapore's close connection to Malay culture. "They were popular with Chinese and Peranakans, too," VM told me. "We recruited people from Malaya who wanted to get into the movies." With Indian producers and Malay crews, Singapore became known as an Asian leader in filmmaking, producing some 20 films each year. But production stopped abruptly in 1967. Run Run had already moved to Hong Kong to start making films there, and P Ramlee retired. Runme, VM and his brother turned their attention to the theatres. They bought more of them, distributing and exhibiting films from Hollywood and Hong Kong. Filmmaking on the island limped along, but by the 1980s the industry was dead, even though Singapore was stable and growing.

"The period of silence was significant," according to Dr. Edna Lim who teaches theatre studies at NUS. "It caused a distinct departure from any legacy of the golden age. Today's films reflect a Singapore we recognise." Singapore's Revival Period kicked off with Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* in 1995. It was the nation's first full-length film and was made for just S\$100,000. Using Mandarin, English and local dialect, it's a tale of a lonely noodle seller who falls in love with a prostitute. The tone is edgy, the scenes graphic.

*Mee Pok Man* travelled to more than 35 festivals, including Venice and Berlin, becoming a harbinger for Khoo's ongoing success. His Tamil-language film, *My Magic*, was nominated for a Palm d'Or award in Cannes



Still photo from *12 Lotus* directed by Royston Tan.



Lead actor Shawn Yue on set with *Rule Number One* Director, Kelvin Tong

last year. I met Khoo for coffee at the Goodwood Park Hotel. His company, Zhao Wei Films, is focusing on the horror genre, which Khoo hopes will put Singapore on the international film map. "We're still waiting to make a breakout film for Singapore, our own *Little Miss Sunshine*," he says, "one that can make a ten-fold profit." Since 1995, the entire industry has grown steadily, thanks to generous government support and easing censorship regulations. It's also bolstered by two American players opening shop here -- Lucasfilms Animation Singapore and NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Asia.

Once again, Singapore is turning out around 20 films a year, some travelling to art houses and festivals abroad. Apart from Khoo, prominent directors can still be counted on one hand: Royston Tan, Kelvin Tong, Jack Neo and Glen Goei. Their films often shed light on the more

## Film Festival 14 – 25 April

The Singapore International Film Festival runs from 14 – 25 April. Local films include 15 features and 80 short films. Singapore Film Award nominations include: Royston Tan's 12 Lotus, Jack Neo's Money No Enough, Kelvin Tong's Rule Number One. Venues include The National Museum of Singapore. [www.filmfest.org.sg](http://www.filmfest.org.sg)



Still photo from Jack Neo's Money No Enough 2

obscure parts of Singaporean society, including the seamier sides. According to VM, locals particularly resonate with the Neo film made during the Asian financial crisis of the late '90s: "I hear it all the time," he says, "Money No Enough, Money No Enough."

"Asia is the new frontier for film," says Tisch Professor David K. Irving. Because film students come from throughout the region, Irving expects Tisch will weather the financial crisis better than most. "Entertainment and education do well in financial downturns. During the depression in the 1930s, people flocked to the movies." The Singapore Film Commission (SFC) agrees. According to Commission Director Kenneth Tan, the goal is to 'internationalise' the industry -- promoting films with a local identity that also have broad appeal outside Singapore. To do that, SFC funds up to 80 percent of a

film's budget. Censors pass the content unless it's deemed dangerous to public harmony.

On Tan's list of top Singapore films to date: *My Magic*, 881, *Forever Fever*, *Money No Enough*. He credits the Singapore International Film Festival with giving local producers their initial start. "Annual output will go up," Tan told me. "We in Singapore have a lot to look forward to." As for me, I'm looking forward to gaining a better understanding of Singapore culture at the upcoming film festival. Maybe I'll invite VM to join me.

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*Jane Peterson recently finished docent training for the Asian Civilisations Museum. She joined FOM last year and immediately signed up for the Peranakan Study Group. Her background is in television news in the US and London. She came to Singapore in 2007 to help her husband expand his investment advisory firm in Asia.*

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*Photos courtesy of 22nd Singapore International Film Festival. For more information, contact SIFF at [filmfest@pacific.net.sg](mailto:filmfest@pacific.net.sg)*