

The Road Less Travelled: Is there a Future for “Home Made” Movies in Singapore?

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous movie industries of many countries face a Titanic struggle to stay afloat. “Home made” movies are fast losing their appeal in the wake of competition from Hollywood blockbusters. Faced with this onslaught, the movie industries in different countries have responded differently. The French and Hong Kong movie industries have focused on non-English movies while the British and Australians have turned their attention away from action blockbusters and concentrated on producing less mainstream and more non-commercial releases.

Recent years have seen the Singapore movie industry trying to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the 70s and 80s. It is ironic that the Singapore movie industry is currently in its dormant state given the fact that Singaporeans hold the record for being the most avid moviegoers in the whole world. On average, the typical Singaporean moviegoer watches at least 7 movies a year. Besides mainstream American blockbusters which undoubtedly make up the bulk of the 7 movies, what other movies does the typical Singaporean moviegoer watch? Is he prepared to support the Singapore movie industry by watching locally produced as well as non-commercial movies?

The success of the Singapore International Film Festival provides some insight into the answer to this question. Now into its 11th year, the Festival is bigger than ever before, running for a fortnight and screening a veritable smorgasborg of 300 movies from 40 different countries. What started out as a small bi-annual event screening mainstream fare like “The Name of the Rose” and “Stand by Me” has matured into a full fledged annual festival with an extended fringe programme reaching out to lunch-time audiences and students. This growing sophistication in the taste of the Singaporean moviegoer augurs well for the revival of the local film industry.

However, many questions remain unanswered. Can the momentum be sustained? How can Singaporean moviemakers secure funding when the average cost of producing and distributing a movie has risen to US\$75mil? This paper traces the history of the Singaporean movie industry, examines the challenges which it faces at present and the prospects for the future.

INTRODUCTION

Singaporeans are amongst the most frequent moviegoers in the world. On average, the typical Singaporean moviegoer watches at least 7 movies a year, a world record. As at December 1997, there were 176 movie screens in Singapore, a sharp rise from the 50 in 1992 and 146 in February 1997.

With a population of only 3 million, Singapore has a very high screens to population ratio compared to other countries. For example, London with a population of 10 million has only 128 screens. With such a high proportion of moviegoers in the population and large number of screens, it is ironic that the Singapore movie industry is currently in the doldrums. In the past 5 years, only a handful of "home made" movies have been produced in Singapore. This is in stark contrast to the 1960s when an average of one movie was made every month. How did this about-turn in events arise? This paper traces the rise and fall of Singapore's home movie industry; examines the challenges faced by the industry today and discusses the future prospects for the industry.

HISTORY OF THE MOVIE INDUSTRY IN SINGAPORE

In order to achieve a better understanding of these issues, it is necessary to consider the history of the movie industry in Singapore.

The cinema was introduced in Singapore as a form of variety theatre and amusement park novelty at the turn of the twentieth century. It very quickly became a popular form of entertainment and by the 1950s, the per capita rate of film attendance in Singapore was already amongst the highest in the world.

Hand in hand with the phenomenal success of the cinema came the rise of the local movie industry. Film production in Singapore started in the 1930s when the Shaw Brothers, Run Run and Runme established their film production company in Singapore and began producing Mandarin movies. After World War II, Shaw Brothers set up their Malay Film Production unit and Cathay Organisation established Cathay-Keris Productions. These two production houses contributed to the growth of the local film industry by churning out one film every month.

However, in the 1960s, the film industry started to go into a depression. This was partly due to the introduction of television in Singapore and Malaysia and the change in the tastes and preferences of cinema-goers who were becoming more educated. Another contributing cause was the development of the Indonesian film industry which directly affected the export of Malay language films to Indonesia. As a result, Shaw Brothers closed their Singapore studios in 1967 and Cathay-Keris wound up in 1972. With the demise of the two large production houses, the local film movie making industry entered into a period of dormancy.

It was only in the 1990s through the efforts of the Economic Development Board that the local film-making industry began to awaken from its slumber. The seeds for the rebirth were planted as early as 1991, when "*Medium Rare*", the US\$1 million film about deranged Singapore killer, Adrian Lim, enjoyed a 16-day run here. Four years later, local film-makers tested the waters again with the sensationalist "*Bugis Street: The Movie*", a film which stirred up a storm for the wrong reasons when it made a false claim about an invitation to compete at the Cannes Film Festival. Premiering together with "*Bugis Street*" at the 1995 Singapore International Film Festival ("SIFF") was Eric Khoo's critically-acclaimed "*Mee Pok Man*". This film, which was

screened at local cinemas, won the Special Mention Prize at the SIFF and participated in no less than 35 film festivals world-wide. Despite these achievements, these three movies only enjoyed modest financial returns commercially.

It took 1996's smash hit, "*Army Daze*" to prove that home-grown films could be commercially viable. This movie cost only S\$700,000 to produce but total box office receipts for the 42-day run in the cinemas totalled S\$1.6 million (Straits Times, 1997). The release of the video, VCD and LD versions by Warner Home Video managed to clock up another 25,000 units of sales. Following this success, two other films, "*12 Storeys*" and "*The Road Less Travelled*" also found their way to the big screen. These three movies even featured prominently in a number of film festivals overseas. Across the Causeway, the 3 movies were screened at the first East Asia Film & Television Festival in Penang, Malaysia. "*12 Storeys*" competed with nine other Asian works in all 16 categories including the Best Film and Best Director Categories and the Special Jury Awards. In Hawaii's 17th Annual International Film Festival, "*12 Storeys*" put Singapore place on the map by winning the Golden Maile Award. Profits from this movie have also rolled in from the sale of the cinema, television and video rights to France's Goutte D'or, Japan's Nikkatsu Corporation and Hong Kong's EDKO Films. Further negotiations are on-going to find German and Korean distributors for the movie.

The success of "*12 Storeys*" is a huge step forward for the Singaporean movie industry. As such, Singaporeans can expect more local movies to come their way. These include the movie adaptation of the popular local book "*The Teenage Textbook*"; "*Forever Fever*" by producer Glen Goei; "*Money No Enough*" and "*Tiger's Whip*". While it is clear that the local film industry is gaining momentum at the moment, it must still overcome a number of challenges.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE LOCAL MOVIE INDUSTRY

The first problem faced by movie producers in Singapore is in the availability (or non-availability) of funding. Even though it is unlikely that local movies will ever require a budget of US\$200 million (like the "*Titanic*"), Singapore film producers still find financial support hard to come by.

Eric Khoo, whose "*12 Storeys*" cost only \$300,000 to produce, had this to say from an investor's point of view (Directions, 1997), "If you want to make money, there are so many better ways of doing it. Film financing has a high risk and anyone who doesn't have an attachment to films is not going to put money into it." Companies are reluctant to fund movies for a number of reasons. Kenneth Tan, Chairman of the Singapore Film Society, explains that while many companies have a tradition of supporting the Arts, they are reluctant to support film makers because they may then have to face the problem of having too many competing requests for sponsorship (Directions, 1997). Companies also have a budget and cannot sponsor indefinitely. The lack of a proven track record in the local movie-making scene is another factor deterring corporate investors, as there is no guarantee of adequate returns in terms of either monetary profit or media exposure. Despite the difficulties, a producer who is persuasive enough can still succeed in securing corporate funding. For example, the Australian movie "*Paradise Road*" which starred Glenn Close was funded by YTC Corporation.

For many years, Singapore, unlike Malaysia, did not have a government board dedicated to the promotion of the local film industry. Malaysia has the Malaysian National Film Development Board ("FINAS") which runs a high-tech movie studio in Kuala Lumpur and offers extensive loans for film projects. Film producers in Malaysia are also exempt from the 30 percent

entertainment tax levied on foreign films. However, in a recent move (Straits Times, 1998), the Singapore government has announced the setting up of the Singapore Film Commission ("SFC") with the goal of encouraging Singaporeans to produce good local movies. To "start the ball rolling", a grant of S\$2.5 million has been awarded to the SFC to disburse as scholarships and "seed money" for film projects in 1998.

Besides the SFC, another possible source of funding is the National Arts Council ("NAC"). The NAC could help in an educational and institutionalised way by nurturing local talent and funding the outstanding graduates of its film-making course. In August 1997, the NAC gave out a total of S\$2.3 million in scholarships, bursaries and grants to 199 recipients with S\$154,000 going to 10 students who were pursuing film courses.

Another way of financing local productions could be through the setting up of a film trust fund, registered as a company and administered principally by a board comprising members in the industry.

Despite these difficulties with funding, a group of young film graduates have remained undeterred and managed to complete their first movie, *"The Road Less Travelled"*, a Mandarin dialogue movie. They got most of their funding from family members and bank loans.

Another factor which stands in the way of the local movie industry is the lack of the necessary technical infrastructure which is the cornerstone of any film industry. Whether such infrastructure exists in Singapore is open to debate. While the Republic has excellent post-production facilities for commercials, these studios are relatively inexperienced when it comes to dealing with feature films. Moreover, for a film to be made, not only a director but a pool of skilled people are also needed. The present pool is not big enough because Singapore does not have an industry in place. Fortunately, all is not lost as tertiary institutions like the Nanyang Technological University and Ngee Ann Polytechnic offer theoretical as well as practical film production courses. The SFC can also help out here. Besides providing funding for local productions, the SFC also aims to make Singapore the "Cannes of the East" by making Singapore a "one-stop centre" catering to the needs of moviemakers. For example, the SFC would be able to help moviemakers obtain permits to film in Singapore.

However, even if the above difficulties can be resolved, one further hurdle lies in the way of Singaporean movie makers and that is the average Singaporean's perception of local movies. What is the average Singaporean's attitude towards local movies and is he prepared to watch a local movie? If Singaporeans are not prepared to watch Singaporean movies, it would be unlikely that a local movie industry can ever develop.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF LOCAL MOVIES

One indication that Singaporeans will support local movies is the success of the Singapore International Film Festival ("SIFF"). The idea of running a film festival in Singapore came about in 1986 when architect and film buff Geoffrey Malone took a trip to the established Mill Valley film festival in California and asked whether a film festival could exist in Singapore. The Mill Valley committee was eager to prove that it could and sent administrators to Singapore to help set up a biennial festival.

The first SIFF was held in 1987. Only 53 films were screened, most of which were mainstream American fare such as the boyhood drama *"Stand By Me"* and kidnapping comedy *"Raising*

Arizona". Mill Valley's involvement ceased after the first year and the SIFF committee, lead by Geoffrey Malone, have managed the film festival on their own ever since. From such humble beginnings, the SIFF has grown into an annual event and this year's 11th SIFF features a veritable smorgasborg of 200 movies from 40 different countries. As an indication that it has "arrived", the film critics' board FIPRESCI in 1993, recognised the SIFF as an important film festival in Asia.

Besides the SIFF other film festivals have also sprung up in Singapore. In 1997, French and German Film Festivals were also held.

The success of such Film Festivals seems to indicate that Singaporean audiences are becoming more mature and more prepared to accept non-mainstream Hollywood blockbuster fare. As it is unlikely that any Singaporean film producer will ever be able to come up with the US\$200 million necessary to produce a *"Titanic"*, it is likely that most locally produced movies will take the form of art or non-commercial productions. The film festivals therefore seem to be a good place to carry out a survey to determine the receptiveness of Singaporeans to local movies.

In a survey carried out during the 10th SIFF last year, it was discovered that almost 80% of Film Festival goers were young ie aged 30 and below. Half were professionals and a quarter were students. There were slightly more females than males (61%). An interesting finding was that amongst couples, more females (52%) were responsible for selecting the film than males (36%). The remainder of the couples shared this responsibility equally. When asked about the type of movie they watched, 45% of the respondents indicated that artistic movies were one of the types of movies they watched; 44% watched comedies and 37% romance. This shows that artistic films form a staple diet for almost half the respondents. This high percentage indicates that movie-goers would watch artistic films even if they were not shown during film festivals. Therefore, there is likely to be a market for such films in Singapore.

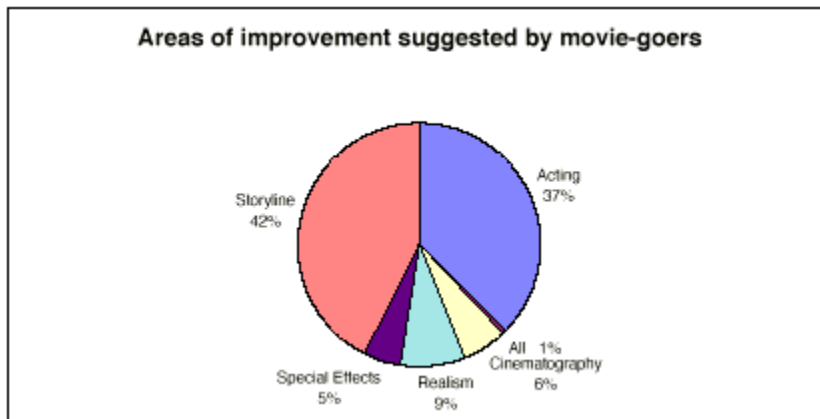
Sixty-seven percent of the patrons of non-commercial films had seen at least one local production. When asked to rate local movies on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent), the following responses were received:

<i>Rating in terms of:</i>	<i>Average Rating</i>
Entertainment	2.9
Acting	2.8
Cinematography	2.7
Storyline	2.7
Sound Effects	2.6
Special Effects	2.5

The majority of the respondents gave the six factors an average rating. While patrons thought that the entertainment value and quality of acting in local productions were above average, both special and sound effects were rated the lowest among the factors. Obviously, patrons did not think highly of these features in local productions. On the whole, local productions were not highly rated by movie-goers in terms of their overall quality as none of the factors were rated above average. It seems that there is much room for improvement.

The respondents were also asked what kinds of improvements they would like to see in local movies. From Figure 1, it can be seen that the major areas of improvement suggested by movie-goers were storyline (42%) and acting (37%). However, it is interesting to note that even though local productions were rated lowly in terms of special and sound effects, only 5% of the patrons interviewed suggested improvements in these areas. The reason could be due to the fact that movie-goers consider the storyline and acting to be more essential to a film. This suggests that patrons of non-commercial film are more concerned with these two attributes and less with special and sound effects. This is supported by the fact that the highest percentage of patrons (36%) watched non-commercial film because of the storyline. A high percentage (26%) also watched a particular film because of the actors.

Figure 1



CONCLUSION

The success of the Singapore International Film Festival and the French and German Film festivals in 1997 definitely indicates that there is a healthy market for non-commercial movies in Singapore. As attendances at these film festivals have risen sharply over the years, it is likely that there will also be a sizeable following if cinemas are prepared to screen critically acclaimed non-commercial films. For example, the screening of Lee Ang's *"The Ice Storm"*, in February this year, attracted sell-out crowds even on weekdays.

However, there is evidence to indicate that cinema operators are still wary of screening non-commercial films. Two films which earned 1998 Academy Award nominations in the Best Actor category, *"The Apostle"* starring Robert Duvall and *"Ulee's Gold"* starring Peter Fonda are unlikely to be screened in Singapore as no distributors have yet expressed an interest in bringing them in. This indicates that the financial viability of a movie is still an important consideration. Moreover, there may be censorship problems. For example, Oscar-nominee *"Boogie Nights"* will not be screened in Singapore because its theme centres on the American pornography industry as well as drugs.

This study on local movies has shown that even though there are numerous complaints about the quality of local productions, especially the standard of the acting and the absence of special effects, most of the respondents have indicated that they would not mind watching a local movie again. This is a positive indication that there is a future for local film production and the movie producer who dares to journey down the "Road Less Travelled".

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