

Everybody Loves Royston

The latest Royston Tan vehicle receives blessings from the authorities – and a dead singer.

By Danny Chan

He may not sway the local box-office the way Jack Neo does, or enjoy an iconic status in the local filmmaking industry as Eric Khoo, but when it comes to making the headlines, no one can come close to the bad boy of Singapore cinema, Royston Tan. With only two movies under his belt – both of which are classified as art house films and sunk at the box-office – you would think that Tan's star as a filmmaker must have dipped into oblivion by now.

That cannot be further from the truth. One of Singapore's most celebrated auteur in the short film making circuit, Tan's foray into the big league of feature productions was just a matter of time. Even before he made his debut feature, he was already earmarked to become one of the rising stars in Asia's filmmaking constellation. His treasure trove of awards, coupled with his irrepressibly charming ways and candor, had around the same time, established him as a darling of the media.

The public and the local press lapped up every single accolade bestowed on him, at home and abroad, with nationalistic pride. The icing on the cake for Tan came in 2004, when Time Magazine named him as one of the "Top 20 Asian Heroes" – a feat even Tan finds difficult to top, to this day.

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Apart from his own admission at once having a phobia of making features, nobody really doubted that Tan would eventually be making a living out of them.

The turning point came in 2003, when he agreed to turn his multiple award winning short *15* – a gritty treatise on marginalized youths filled with vulgar dialogue and other expletives – into a feature of the same name. He recalls his decision to migrate to long-form story telling:

“I was getting too comfortable making short films, since I could churn one out in two months. I realized that I needed to challenge myself for further growth.

“Moreover,” the superstitious Tan continues, “when three different persons



at different times had asked me of the same thing, that is to consider making features, I took that as a sign.”

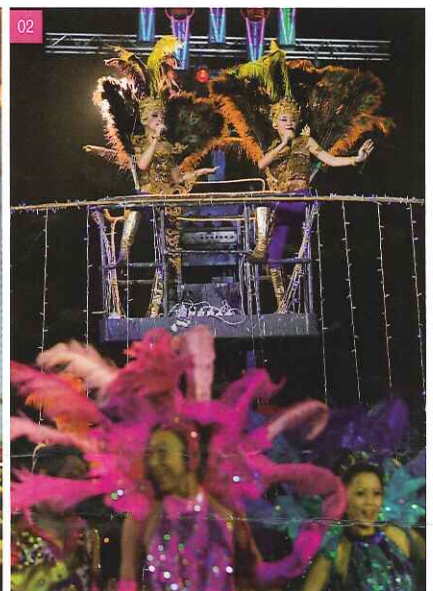
The movie eventually received 27 cuts and a Restricted (Artistic) rating by the Singapore censorship board, which essentially squashed any hopes of the movie doing well locally.

Not one to take things lying down,

Tan rebounded with a 12-minute short entitled *Cut*, that satirizes the strict censorship laws in the Republic. To promote the film at festivals, the indefatigable Tan would don a bunny suit complete with sunglasses – a gregarious stunt indicative of the director's abilities to sell his movies.

For stirring the hornet's nest, that film earned Tan not only his street cred amongst peers but also a cult following almost overnight, not to mention cementing his position, if there were still lingering doubts, as the bad boy of Singapore.

The controversial piece was in Tan's own words, “a way of letting off steam.” While unapologetic for it, he also



01-02: May and Choy (01) takes on Mindee Ong and YeoYann Yann (02) as competing pairs of 'getai' performers

attributes the well-documented saga to that of his 'paternal' instincts kicking in: “I regard each of my films as my baby and saw the need to do something to protect my own.”

Who can blame him for protecting his own flock? Apparently nobody; not even unflinchingly rigid governmental bodies – or rather, they made an exception in the case of Royston Tan.

MDA bankrolls Tan's movie

Four years on, and if Tan's latest cinematic offering bears any indication, that whole episode with the powers that be appears to be water under the bridge. So patched up are things with MDA that the media regulatory body has partnered with four other investor parties to co-invest in Tan's latest musical film, *881*.

Tan attributes the mended fences to Man Shu Shum, the director of broadcast and film development at MDA.

“Ever since Mr Man came on board, he has helped to bridge the gap between filmmakers and the bureaucrats. I think there is a lot of dialogue between the two groups now and a lot less misunderstanding,

Budgeted at around S\$1 million, the five co-investors are producers ZhaoWei Films and Mediagroup Raintree Pictures, along with MDA, Scorpio East Pictures and Infinite Frameworks (IFW).

881 tells the story of The Papaya Sisters, played by Mindee Ong and Yeo Yann Yann. In fact, the story came

about as a joke of an idea tossed around between the director and the two actresses. Tan recounts: “We were joking about how one day we would bring the 'getai' experience to a place like Australia, as part of a touring show. We were trying to find out what was uniquely Singapore and 'getai' came to mind straight away.”

Getai, directly translated as Song Stage, are mini makeshift concerts staged in the seventh month of the Lunar calendar. Chinese people observe the seventh month with a festival known as the Hungry Ghost, a period during which the Gates of Hades are believed to be open; and when burnt offerings are made to the returning dead. These concerts, peculiar to Singaporeans, are meant to placate and entertain the souls who return from the netherworld.

Ever the savvy spokesperson for his films, Tan comments, “*881* will be Singapore's first musical film and I hope to bring out the beauty of Hokkien songs and 'getai' through this brand new interpretation.”

The genesis of this film is also linked to Singapore's 'getai' songwriting legend, Chen Jin Lang, who gave Tan his blessings to use his songs for the film barely weeks before he died of colon cancer. Chen had loved the premise of the script – which Tan completed writing in two weeks – and made an exception to see its author despite his ailing health.

Saddened by the singer's demise, Tan



knew he had to document the funeral procession and change his script to pay homage to the 'getai' superstar. It didn't matter that the script had just been completed and probably endorsed by the film's investors, Tan made the changes almost at whim. Obviously, his creative clout was holding court, and other opinions had to wait.

Voice of the voiceless

From time to time, Tan would see himself as the bastion for the marginalized, and weave in stories of the lonely and destitute into his films.

At risk of overstating the obvious, he iterates: "I always feel that there are stories to be told of people who are living on the fringe or have not been given a chance to vocalize themselves. I think that there are many roles that other directors can tackle but personally, I am interested in all these people."

Through 881, Tan hopes to bring to our attention, how Singapore's past heritage has been neglected and left behind by two metaphorical nemesis often explored in his films – progress and country laws. Somehow, his claims of being apolitical doesn't quite square here.

Although Tan concedes that Chen belonged more to his "parent's generation", he hopes to rekindle interest in the Hokkien dialect through the singer's legacy of music, hence reconnecting Singapore's younger generation to the once commonly spoken



01-03: The array of costumes donned by The Papaya Sisters in 881

dialect. The outspoken director avers: "Hokkien has been a dialect that has been repressed for a long time in the media. I believe it to be part of our culture that needs to be preserved. Once we lose our dialect, a part of us also dies."

Suddenly, you begin to realize Tan's sudden fixation with 'getai' and bringing it to the cinema screens. As if to confirm your suspicion, he continues: "Even for 'getai', I think it has never been accepted by mainstream Singaporeans, but rather I feel it has been alienated by the new generation."

Considering that Hokkien has largely been suppressed by the local

Unlike Jack Neo who has years of show business behind him; and Eric Khoo with his multi-million dollar family estate, Tan's boy-next-door image is believably down-to-earth. His image of a rebellious teen who carved out a career to become one of Asia's most celebrated youth directors based on sheer talent, resonates with the hordes of admirers who look up to him as a role model. Despite a knack for getting into trouble with the authorities, he always seems have the last laugh. And for all his eyebrow raising antics, ultimately it is Tan's maneuvers behind the camera that have earned him a cult reputation that has very few peers.

The 30-year-old has won over 43 international and local film awards for his work to date. In 2001, he won the 6th MVA ASEAN Director of the year,

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authorities – that fear its widespread use could somehow derail efforts towards championing Mandarin as a second language – will a movie with 70 per cent dialect content fall foul of the censors?

"Not yet and we don't know what is going to happen. It has to go through no matter how. If it doesn't go through, I think there's something wrong with our system again," Tan replies whimsically, before hastening to add, "Obviously there are things that can always be improved. We are quite positive about this project because the ministers are quite excited over it. In fact, they requested for a first look at the film."

Asked for the ministers' names, Tan sheepishly relents: "Actually I cannot reveal which ministers..."

But before you even suggest such respect for bureaucratic protocols as a sign of Tan's weakness, as having to kowtow to the likes of MDA, he immediately corrects you: "I'll always be myself."

Being Royston

It is precisely because he exudes such self-confidence, yet never bordering on cockiness, that the public finds Royston Tan such an affable personality.

Silver Award. In 2002, the Singapore National Arts Council named him Young Artist of the year. In 2003, Netpac Jury recognized Royston Tan as one of Asia's most promising talents. And the list of accolades go on...

While he may not be the most prolific of directors, what with only three features to his credit, he certainly enjoys the profile of a director with many more years in the business. How else could his name and that famous rebel persona inspire a feature movie simply titled *Becoming Royston*? In having his name invoked for the title of a film, Tan replies almost nonchalantly:

"I'm not perfect, I have my own weaknesses too yet they see that as strength. It becomes an encouragement for me to move on."

Uttered by anyone else, those words may be construed to make the speaker seem pompous – or at best, schmaltzy – but in the lips of Royston Tan, you can rest assure that any negative connotations will eventually fall by the wayside.

For as MDA and many of his detractors have found out, you can't stay mad at Royston Tan for too long.

881 is scheduled for theatrical release in the third quarter of 2007. ♦



MediaCorp artiste Qi Yiwu (left) also stars in 881