

Tan Pin Pin's new documentary *Singapore Ga Ga* has struck a chord with audiences in Singapore. Its light treatment is a refreshing change, from "heavy" local films and documentaries, that sometimes put off audiences.

By Danny Chan

Sound resonance

Singaporean directors tend to dwell on subjects that portray the daily struggle of the common man. These filmmakers have largely depicted Singapore as an overbearing and suffocating nanny-state. That is why *Singapore Ga Ga* is a refreshing change. It marks a departure from a slew of predictable homegrown films released in recent years. The documentary film has met with much appreciation and is being used as material for social studies lessons in local schools.

Filmmakers in Singapore have often used the medium of films to unveil the city-state's "ugly truths". The trend began with director Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* and was carried on by Royston Tan's *15* and Jack Neo's *I Not Stupid*, amongst others. Although radically different in terms of treatment, both the films dealt with the issue of juvenile delinquency as a result of societal pressures. Adding on the angst was Djinn Ong's *Perth: The Geylang Massacres*, a film that exposed even more cracks beneath Singapore society's glossy veneer. Released last year, the movie is about a cab driver who dreams of migrating to Perth, but finds himself entangled with a prostitute while struggling to survive in a fast-paced and materialistic homeland.

Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel*, a documentary on a Singaporean opposition leader Chee Soon Juan, also suggested a counter-establishment streak within the homegrown filmmaking community.

Although many of these films succeed in striking a chord with audiences, and sometimes expose contentious issues, Singaporeans have generally found the subjects, heavy and images, unsettling. The characters are sometimes so bizarre that the audiences find it difficult to relate to them. For example, despite *15*'s marketing as a true-to-life account of street hoodlums, its young protagonists came across as B-grade actors, hamming it up for a Broadway audition.

Sound memories

In comparison, local auteur Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore Ga Ga* is an obliquely heartwarming treatment of a Singapore subject. Its inimitable appeal lies in how it transcends barriers between the film as a medium and its viewers. It does this with honest and stirring accounts of some of the most interesting characters ever caught on video.

A loosely connected collection of verity vignettes and musical interludes, this documentary film offers a whimsical look at the lives of everyday Singaporeans and their mundane pursuits. The only thread that holds the pieces of seem-



ingly disparate characters and events are the sounds that they generate.

Tan uses the sounds as a metaphor to discuss the often complex and intertwining relations between her countrymen, and the ties and bonds they share in common. These are the sounds that most people take for granted like the school cheers on a sports day; the voice in the intercom on Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), Singapore's internal railway system; a busker's music; and even the melodic calls of a tissue seller. Helming the project as director and producer, Tan's rationale for doing the documentary was part experimental and part indulgence.

She explains, "The whole point of the film was to unearth our memories related to sounds. People always say that places evoke memories but I wanted to

make a film to say that actually, sounds and songs evoke our memories as well. Also, through this film, I got to do stuff that I've always wanted to do like meeting up with Victor Khoo." Victor Khoo, the popular ventriloquist, is a household name in Singapore.

If nothing else, *Singapore Ga Ga* is like a breath of fresh air in an environment where preachy and stereotypical films, that try to expose Singapore's grimy underbelly, flourish. Tan presents the country and its people stripped bare of any pretense or affectations. Hers is a society characterized by the little things, however nondescript or insignificant they may seem.

Through the documentary, Tan compels us to pay attention to the faces that we pass by and take for granted on a daily

basis. Her ubiquitous camera is attracted to the things that we see and hear but fail to take notice, like the busker, who strums and sings to an oblivious crowd in a busy underground walkway, or a fading professional Chinese dialect newsreader.

Her heightened sensitivity, in giving a voice to the voiceless, can be seen from the way she punctuates the seemingly nondescript events with thoughtful interviews. The most memorable being the one in which a harmonica player, Yew Hong Chow, revealed his passion for the musical instrument and extolled its virtues as a good teaching vehicle. His views were juxtaposed with those of an Indian instrumentalist who talked about the compromises of playing the recorder – the current musical instrument of choice for teaching music in Singapore schools. The concomitant exchanges eventually revealed that the recorder was favored over the harmonica for use in schools, because the latter was considered too "Chinese" and "communist" an instrument, while the former was considered more "European".

Inspiration from a communist song

Although the film begins rather abruptly and attempts an awkward introduction with random shifts of totally unrelated images, it starts to gain coherence by the time it shows an elderly Chinese man singing a Mandarin song. Only upon reading the English lyrics, provided at the bottom of the screen, does one realize that this was not a Karaoke rehearsal for the senior citizen championships. In fact, it was a marching anthem for the Chinese red army, a communist ditty sung in battlefields as a morale booster. As it turns out, the man happens to be Tan's relative.

Tan explained that she had been inspired to do the documentary after hearing her relative sing the communist song. Tan's uncle and aunt were Communist warriors who fought against the Japanese during the Second World War. When her aunt was suffering from dementia and appeared catatonic, it was the song that managed to elicit bodily responses from her. The song was credited for reviving the old lady's memory and eventually making her hum along.

Tan explains, "This song, sung with the right posture, gave me a sense of how we became who we are today. It rendered real, the fact of wars fought and won. It also gave me a sense of how powerful sounds and music are in defining oneself or a community."

With that sketchy idea, Tan began

marshalling her buddies and former film collaborators for the project. The documentary eventually took nine months of research and filming. It was first screened at the Singapore Film Festival last April. It also traveled to Europe for the Rotterdam International Film Festival early this year. The film's budget worked out to be about S\$100,000 (US\$61,300), and this amount was raised during the shoot. The bulk of the money went toward paying the crew and some interviewees. She states emphatically, "Singapore Ga Ga was made with the barest of resources, the most expensive resource being my time."

Tan adds that the time she spent filming the documentary could have been used to complete an entire television series.

A former lawyer, Tan left the profession nine years back to get into direction. Her first stint was with Television Corporation of Singapore (formerly called Mediacorp Singapore), which she joined as an assistant director. There she spent two years at the English drama department directing local programs like *Triple Nine* and *Under One Roof*, before she resigned to pursue further studies. She did her Master's in Fine Arts from Northwestern University, USA, where she received the Eastman Scholarship for Cinematography and the Rajaratnam Scholarship.

She assumed her present role as a full-time producer and director after completing her studies. Tan's works have won more than 20 awards and nominations including the Student Academy Award and the USA-ASEAN Film Award for *Moving House*. Her television credits include a series on death rites called *Afterlife* and *Crossings: John Woo*, both made for Discovery Channel Asia. *Singapore Ga Ga* is Tan's first independent documentary. It will be the first locally made documentary to be screened at Singapore's Arts House. The 5-week long screening begins on 11 March 2006.

overt use of local slang or banal humor, which unfortunately, marks the work of many of her peers.

As a Singaporean, I could relate to the mundane topics and everyday encounters covered in the documentary. The people in it appear so real that it makes the viewer feel as if he or she is merely offering them a listening ear. It also helps that there are no voice-overs or narration. This convinces us that it was not going to be another long and boring indoctrination exercise.

Some of the interesting characters



01-03: Tan's camera is attracted to things that most people take for granted.

Dealing with politics

During the editing process there was another issue that weighed on Tan's mind. As a filmmaker, she was keenly aware of sensitive issues that may arise from making a film that discusses "Singapore" as a central subject. In fact, Tan was one of the writers who wrote an open letter to the local authorities seeking clarification on the censorship boundaries for local filmmakers. The letter was written after the police had questioned her friend, Martyn See, one of the off-line editors for *Singapore Ga Ga*, about his film *Singapore Rebel*.

"If you have to say anything critical in Singapore, you have to say something without really saying it." Tan is reported to have said during an interview given to *South China Morning Post*. "It's a sort of shadow dance that I find myself sometimes threading," she said.

On side stepping political minefields, Tan advocates a multi-layering approach to filmmaking, "I find that making a documentary this way, when there are different levels in which you can approach it, is probably the way for me to continue making films in Singapore. Anything more explicit will probably invite too many questions."

Indeed, upon closer inspection, *Singapore Ga Ga* displays another side to Tan's filmmaking finesse. Without ever going head-on with a potentially explosive topic, Tan skirts her issues deftly and at the same time manages to convey the message. This is illustrated by how she nudged the authorities gently with the harmonica story. She seems to know that when political lines are being crossed or perceived as such, they have an effect of marring or drowning out the intended message of the work.

The good news is that *Singapore Ga Ga* not only passed the strict local censors; it is currently on a screening tour around Singapore schools. So far, about ten schools have screened the documentary as part of their Social Studies lessons.

Whether *Singapore Ga Ga* has anything to offer in terms of public education is debatable, but one thing is certain; that light-hearted, everyday occurrences can make for a compelling documentary film. ♦



The spontaneity is for real

While the "Singaporeanness" of most local films appears like giant signposts, Tan's minimalist treatment somehow works better in establishing its identity. By contextually weaving in local references, her film connects with Singapore viewers without having to resort to the

featured in *Singapore Ga Ga* came from Tan's accidental encounters. An example is a lady selling tissue that Tan stumbled upon, near a train station.

"I instinctively knew that I had to capture her on video so I went back home for my PD150 camera, and ran all the way back to shoot her," says Tan.

This was the kind of spontaneity that gives the production an unpretentious and authentic feel. Its free-flowing character has much to do with the fact that Tan had operated without any script or storyboard, different from other documentaries that look contrived.

However, if left unchecked, the "anything goes" approach also ran the risk of going haywire. Tan says, "When I started shooting, they were happy shoots because everyone I met, I liked, which does not happen every time. I felt the energy was being transferred from these people to me, so I just kept on shooting. I would have forgotten to finish it because there were no transmission dates. Luckily Josephine (Seetoh) was there to remind me about the deadline to submit it for the Singapore Film Festival."

Prior to the editing stage nobody had any idea what *Singapore Ga Ga* was going to be about, not even Tan, who was still exploring the concept of sounds in a Singapore context.

"The film really came together at the editing stage. We had shot over 30 hours of footage and then whittled it down to 55 minutes. This is considered a very high shooting-to-final edit ratio," says Tan.