

INSIGHTS > The Dream of a Simple Man

BY KERRINE GOH
30 MAR 2004

The Dream of a Simple Man

Reflections of the underside of Singapore's streets by Djinn, the director/writer of local feature film "PERTH" starring Lim Kay Tong and Liu Qiulian.

What lies behind the inspiration to a film?

As a Singaporean, I have lived in Los Angeles for the past 7 years and have come to be acquainted with a rather stereotypical view of our young city-state. The home of hainanese chicken rice is also known to be over-regulated, over efficient, and still located in China, which once upon a time whipped some white kid's ass (not necessarily seen as a bad thing)

Of course there are truths to stereotypes but there is also another side to the litter clean streets. I wanted to write a film about the average Singapore man and his experience toiling the fields beneath the facade of the perfect intelligent city.

Instead I wrote "Perth", the story of an ex-wife beater, a monster with aspirations to exorcise his past demons before going over to the greener grass of Perth western Australia, his heaven on earth.

In order to find my inspiration for the story, I drew from several experiences which I felt quantified much of the average day to day struggle in the city.

Firstly the ubiquitous cab ride. The cab driver and his opinions. A job driving a taxi is the ultimate fall back plan to anyone acquainted with retrenchment. A job as a taxi driver is surely the epitome of an average blue collar Singapore job where one could always feel (more likely be force fed with) the pulse of the nation.

On my many rides to and from the airport and in and about town, I got to be familiar with strange phenomenon. It seemed then anyway, in the late 90s that most cab drivers who voluntarily decided to engage me in unbridled conversations; from the price of petrol to the price of whores in Batam, were obsessed with the idea of leaving these shores for greener (cheaper and less demanding) pastures.

This paradise pasture on earth was Perth, Australia. Singapore's second city. A city equally stereotyped in the Singaporean mind where sea food was cheap and plentiful and life was less judgmental and less based on the merits of material success.

What an interesting alternative to a city whose measurement of success for it's citizenry was measured in double digit GDP annual growth figures, government bonuses, productivity in work and in bed(or the lack there of) and the ever expanding five 'C's to keep up with. What could a filmmaker, peering through this, discover ?

The second inspiration came from what would come to encapsulate the ultimate male (and female) experience of being Singaporean, that wonderful melting pot institution known as the conscripted army.

Spending time with the old timers and ranking senior NCOs (Non-commissioned Officer's) over mutton curry, boxing tournaments and warm beer inevitably led to intoxicated arguments over the level of army fitness, poor eyesight of the average soldier, the ever increasing number of generals to have to salute to, their poor eyesight, and again, a mention of what was to become the trendy retirement home from service, Perth! The Australian town, again.

I thought to myself: At last and pretty soon, the city in Western Oz would have no shortage of ex- Singaporean taxi drivers and ex-Singaporean NCOs! Certainly no lack of opinions here for sure.

For my third and final inspiration, I did not have to look too far.

The old family reunion with the extended family, to me was never beyond the odd marriage of some unknown cousin, the occasional Chinese New Year (In which I was fortunate enough to be in town for a harvest of red packets) and the sporadic but tragic death in the family.

It was especially during the death in the family that one would inevitably find some pony tailed uncle whom the older relatives would take as an example as an individual who 'could have been a contender' but succumbed to the double evils of rock and roll and long hair, and most unfortunately have fallen by the way side.

I was rather unfortunate(or fortunate) thus in having several of these black sheep uncles who had not the acceptance and respect from the family for which they (deep down within) so deeply craved for.

One uncle in particular, became the prototype to the story "PERTH". He had served in the Vietnam war as first mate on a Singapore shipping line running P.O.L carriers bringing aviation fuel up river to besieged cities throughout the Mekong and beyond.

Carrying a colt 45 and a Saturday Night Special and delivering fuel up a Khmer Rouge-infested river was surely not a job or life experience commonly associated with many Singaporeans.

Yet shipping has been the lifeblood of Singapore for generations.

I dug deeper and pretty soon found more notable Singaporeans who served with distinction in Vietnam!

And to top it all, this uncle of mine too had aspirations to migrate to the second city Perth! An uncanny sometimes spooky pattern was emerging.

And as I looked deeper, it became apparent that beyond the bland image of the average Singaporean held in common belief by both locals and foreigners alike, that there were a fair number of rather scarred individuals, mulling in their hubris and live humbly day to day, carving a living out of a city which has charged ahead of them through emphasis in educational merit and technology

These individuals were left behind, dreaming of a simpler life whilst scampering around like cockroaches in the underbelly of the city, scraping for survival as best as they could within the labyrinth of the great underground cities of hotels, as security for high end condos, or as taxi drivers, working the late nights.

I began to become fascinated by these individuals. It became a pattern based on pride and self-perceived underachievement. Mixed with something all the more sinister, a nightmare of convenience in shifting the blame on others.

Intoxicated with their dreams of a simpler life away from the expectations of a city that they could never fulfil, these individuals were all too often slave to the oldest legal hallucinagent available, the drink.

And the monsters of the night began to come out, the demons of past mistakes in love and marriage. The betrayals. The solace in the bottle. The illusional comfort of knowing the better place around the corner...Perth.

Yet, they weren't very far removed from the rest of us and that's what the story was going to be all about.

Thus I embarked on 'Perth' a story of a simple man's attempt to dream of a simple life in a cosmopolitan city. Using the camera's eye, I wanted to find

out for myself, and in doing so, for others, how these forgotten citizens coped with living and attempting to get out of Singapore.

This gargantuan task egged me on for four years till it was finally shot and produced last year. Whether I have been true to my research remains to be seen. The inspiration has lingered around and like all other filmmakers, I want the film to be able to have an opportunity to speak to the people.

SIMILAR CONTENT

POSTED ON
04 JUL 2016



India's taxi fabric project - young creatives' amazing work

NEWS
INDIA

BY KERRINE GOH
03 FEB 2005

The Rites Of Passage Of A Filmmaker: Rejection And The Resilience That Is Created From It

POSTED ON
19 AUG 2013

Short Story: When Mother Went to Vienna | Jaishree Misra | United Kingdom



#ASEFCulture

NEWS
UNITED KINGDOM

SINGAPORE

BY NAIMA MORELLI
18 JAN 2018

Marrying art and literature in Singapore | The case of Delere Press



INTERVIEWS
SINGAPORE

POSTED ON
19 AUG 2013

Short Story: Hotel Imperial | William Tham | Malaysia

#ASEFCulture

NEWS
MALAYSIA

BY MAGALI AN BERTHON
01 OCT 2014

Between two-cultures : Euro-Asian creative personalities (part I)



FEATURES
FRANCE PHILIPPINES UNITED KINGDOM VIET NAM

COUNTRY
SINGAPORE

DISCIPLINE
FILM

ABOUT ASEF CULTURE360

culture360.asef.org brings Asia and Europe closer by providing information, facilitating dialogue and stimulating reflection on the arts and culture of the two regions.

This website was created and maintained with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



[About us](#)

[Team](#)

[Partners](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Brand guidelines](#)

[How to partner with us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[#ASEFCulture](#)