

Singapore International Film Festival 2014

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NOTES FROM A SLIGHTLY SMALL ISLAND: SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Following a two-year hiatus that included a complete revamping of its structure and organization, the Singapore International Film Festival returned for its 25th edition (4-14 December 2014) bigger and better than ever, with a re-branding effort that changed the former 'SIFF' into its current 'SGIFF'. A part of the inaugural Singapore Media Festival, SGIFF featured over 147 films from 50 countries spread over ten days and eleven sections, with a team headed by executive director Wahyuni Hadi and director-programmer Zhang Wenjie. It may be safe to say that the revitalized SGIFF heralds a new golden age of Singaporean and Southeast Asian, cinema.

Indeed, the inception of SIFF is itself a fortuitous event - founded in 1987 by Australian-born, Singapore-based Geoff Malone and American L. Leland Whitney. The first edition of the SIFF opened after a year's delay, and the second edition took place only two years later after controversies arose from the first. It had nevertheless opened a floodgate: Singapore became the centre of a renaissance for Southeast Asian cinema, allowing works that were too independent to find a distributor to finally have a mainstream platform where the public could access them. Now after thirty years, Singapore remains as relevant as it had been for films in the region, and the time is ripe for a new wave of talents to take the baton from the hands of their predecessors.



Figure 1: The cast of *Unlucky Plaza* at the opening of the 25th SGIFF

The festival opened with Ken Kwek's debut feature, *Unlucky Plaza* (Singapore, 2014) a satirical drama about socio-political issues in Singapore. Starring local veterans such as thespians Adrian Pang and Judee Tan, the film had its world premiere in the Discovery section at the Toronto International Film Festival, where director-writer Ken Kwek was recognized as part of the generation of new directors that, collectively, are "the future of world cinema".

The jury for the Asian Feature Film Competition was headed by the Chinese director Wang Xiaoshuai, whose new feature *Red Amnesia* (China, 2014) was part of the Asian Vision programme in the Festival. Other jury members were Thai filmmaker Kongdej Jaturanrasmee, Chinese actress Huang Lu, and Singaporean

filmmaker Kelvin Tong. For the Southeast Asian Short Film Competition, respected Singaporean director Royston Tan served as jury head, while the jury members were Nguyen Trinh Thi, a Vietnamese independent filmmaker and video artist, and Yeo Yann Yann, a Malaysia-born, Singapore-based actress, who played in the sex comedy *Rubbers* (Singapore, 2014), which was included in the Singapore Panorama section of the Festival.

Eleven films participated in the Asian Feature Film Competition. Highlights included *Above the Clouds* (Philippines, 2014), the second feature of director Pepe Diokno, a spirited *bildungsroman* about a young man who tries to overcome the grief of his parents' death in a flood by embarking on a mountainous hike with his grandfather.

Ant Story by Mostofa Sarwar Farooki (Bangladesh, 2013), is a somewhat surrealistic black comedy that explores the middle-class pathos and social insecurities of modern day Bangladesh. *Antonym* (Japan, 2014), is the debut feature of writer-director Natsuka Kusano, is a compelling drama about two women who team up to write a radio play. The film won Best Director and the SKIP CITY Award at the Skip City International D-Cinema Festival in Japan.



Figure 2: *Unlucky Plaza*

Court (India, 2014), the debut feature of Indian director Chaitanya Tamhane that won the Lion of the Future Best Debut Award at the 2014 Venice Film Festival, is a courtroom drama that examines judicial flaws and inequalities in contemporary Mumbai with a nuanced hand. *Meeting Dr. Sun* (Taiwan, 2014), an absurdist comedy by Taiwanese director Yee Chih-yen that functions as a vicious, vindictive, but hilarious social commentary on socio-economic issues in Taiwan. *Siti* (Indonesia, 2014), a deeply moving character study by director Eddie Cahyono, featuring a strong performance by actress Sekar Sari, is about a young mother's struggle to support her family following an accident that left her fisherman husband paralyzed.

Nineteen entries competed in the Southeast Asian Short Film Competition. Highlights included *Not Working Today* (Singapore, 2014) by Shijie Tan, which follows a foreign worker as he seeks justice for maltreatment at the hands of his employers. *Pifuskin* (Singapore, 2014) by Tan Wei Keong, an experimental animation about the psychosomatic effects that the environment has on the human body. *Dahdi (Granny)* (Singapore, 2014) by Kirsten Tan, a well-made film that depicts an encounter between an elderly woman and a young Burmese Rohingya girl, who seeks asylum from ethnic violence in her native country. *Xing* (Malaysia, 2014) by Bradley Liew, is a wistful exploration of the relationship between a Chinese lounge singer and a Malay gangster.

Onomastika (Indonesia, 2014) by Loeloe Hendra, a coming-of-age film that focuses on a nameless boy who



Figure 3: The winning *Court* by Chaitanya Tamhane

desires one. *May Dinadala* (Philippines, 2014) by Giancarlo Abrahan, a modern fantasy about a miner who cheats on his pregnant and estranged wife with a mysterious black figure, yet retains deep tenderness for his unborn child. *That Day of the Month* (Thailand, 2014) by Jirassaya Wangsutin explores adolescent sexuality with a maudlin, yet oddly affecting, conflict between two girls. *On Stopping the Rain* (Indonesia, 2013) by Aditya Ahmad, a sweet and charming film about a young girl who participates in a kooky old custom to stop the rain that is stopping her from playing outside.

Other films that were widely discussed and received press attention included the Persian *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (Iran, 2014), the debut feature of Iranian-American director Ana Lily Amirpour, which was billed as 'Cinema's first Iranian vampire western' and featured a playful intersection of surrealistic and pulp sequences, as well as a thoughtful undercurrent that opines subtly on various Iranian issues, and Oliver Assayas' metadramatic *Clouds of Sils Maria* (France, 2014), which boasts an all-women cast that explores the complex nature of the role of women at different ages and stages. Featuring strong performances from French actress Juliette Binoche and the American Chloe Grace Moretz and Kristen Stewart, *Clouds of Sils Maria* turns a clinical, though somewhat sympathetic, eye at the manners with which women carve out their own niche of existence from happenstances that they had no control over. *Lilting* (United Kingdom, 2014) by Hong Khaou received critical accolades within and without the festival circuit with its sensitive and thoughtful meditation on grief from two different sources: a man's lover and a man's mother, suitably portrayed by Chinese film veteran Cheng Pei Pei and British actor Ben Whishaw.

In the Classics section, established works and old indie darlings were presented, with a commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of the Thai Film Archive, a long-time collaborator of the SGIFF. It highlighted two films by Siamese film pioneer Piak Poster: *Choo* (Thailand, 1972) and *Wai Onlawon* (Thailand, 1976) which were staples of Thai cinema and that set the standard for future teen comedies and romantic dramas.

The Filmmaker-In-Focus programme featured acclaimed Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla with a showing of four films. It included the Asian Premiere of his latest work *Décor* (2014), a psychological drama about a successful film set designer who, under mounting pressure from her latest production, finds herself slipping into the role of a married housewife. This film is notable for being Abdalla's first venture into commercial filmmaking, and pays homage to classic Egyptian Cinema with a lush and rich monochrome finish.

The others were *Heliopolis* (2009), a deeply personal film made after a difficult period in the director's life, a story interwoven by the histories and actions of six people over the course of one winter day in the old suburb of Heliopolis. The film was produced on a minimum budget and filmed on location. One of the first films of the Egyptian independent new wave, it also won the Special Mention at the Cairo International Film Festival in 2009.



Figure 4: *Dahdi (Granny)* by Kirsten Tan

Microphone (2010) explores the underground art scene in Alexandria via the eyes of a man who returns to Egypt after a long time abroad. It won prizes at international film festivals in Cairo, Carthage, and Istanbul.

The third feature of Ahmad Abdalla, *Rags and Tatters* (2013), is a brutal deconstruction of the romanticism of the Arab Spring through an examination of the Spartan living conditions of Cairo's marginalized communities. It 'tells the untold stories of the people whom the revolution never reached'. It also features Abdalla's signature technique of including real people in the narrative.

A tribute to Im Kwon-taek, revered as the father of modern Korean cinema, also took place at the 25th SGIFF. A selection of three films by Im was shown: *Mandala* (1981), a story about the relationship between two travelling monks that cemented Im's status as a leading Korean auteur; *Village in the Mist* (1982), about a young teacher who arrives in a secluded and isolated mountain village to teach at its elementary school and discovers the dark and seething secret of the true nature of the village; and *Revivre* (2014), Im's 102nd work that received critical acclaim from recent festival screenings in Venice, Toronto and Busan, with its frank discussion of love and loss between a middle-aged man who falls in love with a young woman while still caring for his cancer-stricken wife.

Masterclasses were also conducted, with highlights ranging from a sharing session with screen star Nastassja Kinski, to a session with Hong Kong director John Woo.

The Award Ceremony featured a short film that summed up the journey of the SIFF to become SGIFF, as well as a moving tribute to the late Sir Run Run Shaw by Cheng Pei Pei. The Honorary Award was also presented to director Im, for his invaluable contribution to world cinema. In the Closing Ceremony held the next day, Lucky Kuswandi's *In the Absence of the Sun* (Indonesia, 2014) was screened, followed by a question-and-answer session with the cast and crew.

For lovers of Southeast Asian films and world cinema, the SGIFF is definitely the place to be: with an efficient blend of Western showmanship and Eastern sensibility, the Festival has proven itself to be a driving force in advancing and celebrating filmmaking. Audiences will await the SGIFF with eager anticipation to return another year to breach new territories as it has been doing for almost three decades.

References

AWARDS



Figure 5: Aditya Ahmad's *On Stopping the Rain*

Asian Feature Film Categories

Best Film

Court by Chaitanya Tamhane

Best Director

Chaitanya Tamhane (*Court*)

Best Performance

Sekar Sari (*Siti*)

Special Mention

Alive

Southeast Asian Short Film Categories

Best Southeast Asian Short Film

Dahdi (Granny) by Kirsten Tan

Best Singapore Short Film

Not Working Today by Shijie Tan

Best Director Aditya Ahmad

(*On Stopping the Rain*)

Youth Jury Prize

May Dinadala (The Weight) by Giancarlo Abrahan

Special Mention

Vanishing Horizon of the Sea by Chulayarnnon Siriphol

Reports

Photo credits: "Opening of the SGIFF": SGIFF; *Unlucky Plaza*: Kaya Toast Pictures; *Court*: Zoo Entertainment; *On Stopping the Rain*: Aditya Ahmad; *Dahdi*: Kirsten Tan.

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