



Singapore Yvonne Ng

As far as quality is concerned, 2009 was a muted year for Singaporean cinema. It began with considerable media hype surrounding two commercially oriented Chinese releases. **The Wedding Game** (*Da xi shi*) by Thai-born, Singapore-based Ekachai Uekrongtham featured real-life celebrity couple Fann Wong and Christopher Lee as movie stars who fake their romance for fame and profit. The US\$1.5 million romantic comedy pitted its star power against the less glamorous **Love Matters** (*Xing fu wan sui*), co-directed by veteran filmmaker Jack Neo and newcomer Gilbert Chan for under US\$1 million. It revolves around three couples of varying ages coping with romantic and sexual problems.

Comedies and horror continued to be staples of mainstream Singapore cinema. Jack Neo, co-directing with Boris Boo, combined the two genres in the Chinese-language **Where Got Ghost?** Comprising three separate tales, the film sported Neo regulars and retained his trademark humour and sentimentality. Another ghostly yarn was Glen Goei's **Blue Mansion**, an English-language black comedy that owed a debt to Agatha Christie whodunits, which featured a Singapore-Malaysian cast of well-known



Jack Neo and Boris Boo's **Where Got Ghost?**

stage names. A pineapple tycoon returns as a ghost at his own wake and attempts to uncover the cause of his death. Though the script could have been better, the visuals were highly polished. The US\$2 million independent production was shot in a nineteenth-century UNESCO heritage mansion in Penang, Malaysia.

Chai Yee Wei's feature debut, **Blood Ties** (*Huan hun*), is based on his eponymous short. The gory, non-linear narrative tells the story of a murdered policeman whose spirit returns to possess his younger sister in order to exact revenge on his killers. It was the first film completed under the Singapore Film Commission's feature-film fund.

Independent features offered more contemplative fare. Jason Lai's **Brother No. 2** was a thought-provoking documentary about those who suffered under the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, as represented by the story of Soy Sen, a prison-camp survivor. The film included an interview with Nuon Chea, Pol Pot's second-in-command, now awaiting trial by an international tribunal.

Kan Lume's **Female Games** examined female friendship and rivalry through two naive young Singapore models, who venture into neighbouring Malaysia to advance their careers. The film traces their relationship, from strangers to friends and ultimately enemies, culminating in a vicious catfight. The film's Sapphic finale was censored, causing it to be withdrawn from the 2009 Singapore International Film Festival.

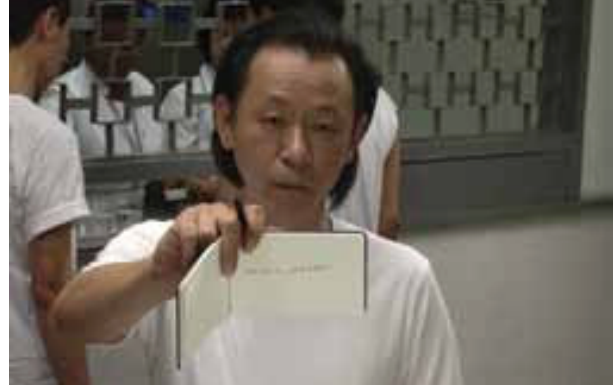
Though the censors are now more tolerant of homosexuality, it is still a sensitive subject, particularly when the authorities themselves

are depicted. Boo Junfeng's **Tanjong Rhu** and Loo Zihan's **Threshold**, two short films based on real-life police-entrapment exercises and the subsequent arrest of gay men, were inexplicably pulled out of the government-supported Sixth annual Short Cuts Film Festival. Both films were rated R21 and passed uncut. **For Two** (*Er Ren*) by Tan Shijie was another short film inspired by true events. Shot without dialogue, this 17-minute study of a fragile relationship revolves around a widower living in an apartment and a woman who secretly shares the flat with him. It competed at the Venice Film Festival.

A sense of entrapment and a desire to escape was a theme that ran through several low-budget, independent productions, including **Invisible Children**. The first feature of 29-year-old multimedia artist Brian Gothong Tan, it owed a debt to Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* through its public housing block setting and the depiction of the empty, joyless lives of those who live in it.

Multimedia artist Ho Tzu Nyen took the idea of inner and outer imprisonment a step further in his original experimental first feature, **Here**. A man called He Zhiyuan strangles his wife and is sent to the Island hospital for the criminally insane. There, he and other inmates undergo a 'videocure' as part of their treatment. Ho's sensitivity to visual design and sound is apparent. The film premiered at the 41st Directors' Fortnight at Cannes. Ho also created **Earth**, a 41-minute, unique tableau vivant on the fate of the Earth, which screened at Venice.

At Cannes, the Media Development Authority announced three initiatives as part of the Singapore Media Fusion Plan. In addition to the US\$358 million already committed to interactive digital media research and development, another US\$165 million has been allocated to an International Film Fund to encourage local-foreign partnerships to make films with global appeal, as well as the production of stereoscopic 3D films and the development of Mediapolis@one-north, a state-of-the-art studio with sound stages, digital production, broadcast and distribution facilities.



Ho Tzu Nyen's **Here**

The year's best films

Here (Ho Tzu Nyen)

Brother No. 2 (Jason Lai)

For Two (Tan Shijie)

Tanjong Rhu (Boo Junfeng)

Quotes of the year

'I had to make the film 100 times in my own mind. While writing the script, I was also planning the camera moves and editing points.' HO TZU NYEN *on completing Here in 11 days.*

'Unless you have the resources for it, making films like that in Singapore would be akin to trying to construct the Empire State Building in your backyard.' Filmmaker KAN LUME *on never trying to compete with Hollywood.*

Directory

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YVONNE NG is on the editorial board of *KINEMA*. She is co-author of *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (2000), *Latent Images: Film in Singapore CD-ROM* (2003) and *Latent Images: Film in Singapore Second Edition* (2009).
