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Seek, so you shall find

Singapore-based producer Juan Foo shares his thoughts and afterthoughts having been one of the Asian projects to be selected to participate in the 'Produire Au Sud' workshop and networking seminar; both in Bangkok, Thailand and Nantes, France.

Film is the most collaborative art form ever been deemed 'art'; yet it forms a large part of the commercial entertainment business. Whether driven by art or by entertainment, film is intuitively a product. And behind every product is a well-known team. Everyone knows what a director does. Everyone knows what an actor/actress does. And to the technically inclined, most would know what a cinematographer does. But not many can define what a producer does. To be really truthful, the role of the producer is as enigmatic as the how film can be paradoxically 'art' and 'entertainment' at the same time.

Coming from a very small and nascent film community, there is almost no precedence of independent producing and thus, for me, independent producing has been predominantly a self-motivated and self-taught undertaking. It is candidly, a tumultuous and at lesser times a rewarding experience. Producing films via the 'trial-and-error' process wears anyone down. My journey was certainly a trial by fire; where partnerships had become strained, projects that inadvertently stall, and even accreditation lost.

I felt I wanted some form of assurance, that producing is what I believe it to be, and similarly I felt I needed, very much urgently, to know more about producing.

I felt the role of the producer needed much demystifying in Singapore. With so much attention given to the growing media scene, production opportunities abound creating ill-defined and self-proclaimed functions that are seductively rewarding, crudely coalesced and hence dangerously volatile. Many production companies regard producers as very experienced line producers and senior production managers. While it may be true that experienced production managers can rise to the occasion to become producers, it is not a surety that they are good in the entertainment business and product development. On the other hand, many entrepreneurial individuals who do not have a filmmaking background venture into producing without the skill, craft or passion of telling stories. There has to be a balance of the elements of filmmaking and business.

I was to seek this balance. Hence, I went to the 'Produire Au Sud' workshop with a purpose. And that was to discover what were the perspectives and the roles of the producer and whether my perspectives of it as this balance, was accurate.

The 'Produire Au Sud' program is a consortium of filmmakers who converge at The Festival of 3 Continents, Nantes to workshop, pitch and develop their film projects. The program is specially set up to provide assistance, advice and exposure for filmmaking countries in the Southern Hemisphere to develop and fund their film projects as a form of cultural retention, awareness and promotion. Hence the name 'Produire Au Sud'

A pre-selection of projects for the 'Produire Au Sud' was organised in Bangkok in conjunction with the World Bangkok Film Festival. 10 projects from Vietnam, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand were selected from entries all over South Asia. For the next three days, the selected projects were put through producing and script consulting sessions. The last day was a pitching contest where the producers of each project presented their projects to a panel of film festival organizers, European producers, script doctors and sales agents. My project 'Forgotten Tears' was among the 3 South East Asian projects chosen to participate in the main 'Produire Au Sud' program in Nantes.

This is the first year where a Singapore feature film is selected to attend and participate in this workshop. 'Forgotten Tears' is an eerie psychological drama revolving around a professional mourner who can weep for others but cannot cry for her own children's deaths. This film was written and to be directed by Ellery Ngiam, an award-winning film director. The script had earlier won the Gold Award at the MDA feature script-writing competition in 2004 and the 2005 New York Asian American International Film Festival Screenplay Competition. The plan was to raise funds and awareness to this project and look for co-producers. As such, it was very timely that the project brought us to Nantes and Bangkok.

Each team had its film producer and director to attend the workshops. At Nantes, we met with our counterparts from Latin America and Central Asia. The producers participated in workshops ranging from fund-raising, distribution, legalities and marketing. At the end of the workshop the producers again presented their project pitches to the general public in a forum and other co-producers during one-on-one sessions.

The film teams of the producer and director also had the opportunity to have their film scripts analysed by three or four script doctors. The script consulting sessions with the script doctors proved to be very rewarding and beneficial. We had extended but fruitful discourse over the structure, story and the mechanics of the screenplay. It is important for the producer to be involved in the writing process.

Another rarity I discovered was the open sharing of 'producing' information such as funding structures and networking. These are difficult to access in Asia. In Europe, the funding structures for film projects are established and sophisticated. This seemed to allow producers to concentrate the most important aspects of a film; which are the creative, promotional, and market development of it, instead of being bogged down in grappling the structural process and procedures. Perhaps this is the reason why European films have carved an influential niche for themselves in the global marketplace, as compared to the emerging film markets like Singapore.

Previously I had the preconceived notion that Singapore is the only place where funding independent movies is really difficult; given that most countries have a longer tradition of film culture than Singapore. Then I met my counterparts from other countries. I realised that everyone who wanted to make a film in their own country outside their own 'studio' system similarly faced tough times. You could say we empathized for one another and drew strength from it.

I returned from Nantes with almost a newfound confidence. I felt assured that what I knew about the role of the producer is not far from the truth and that, I gained more insight into the role, and will continue learning. With that, I am convinced that I am able draw some final, though non-exhaustive, conclusions on the role of the producer:

The producer is a creator. He/she initiates the idea of the film and is part of the earliest participants in the creative gestation of the film. His/her input is indelibly felt and resonated throughout all stages of the film.

The producer is a businessman making a media product be it art or entertainment. He/she has to harness resources, funds, knowledge, techniques, both tangible and intangible, to produce the film, and to manage it as a product for consumption and appreciation by the man in the street.

The producer is a quality manager. He/she has to put the film above all other things to ensure its initial vision, intrinsic purpose and eventual quality is preserved. To ensure this, the producer has to be aesthetically, commercially and technically proficient enough to hold the film together.

I am still seeking more truths about filmmaking. It is great to be given a sense of clarity within the complexity of the filmmaking craft. I am also glad that the emphasis of the workshop is to train producers, because the industry here really is in dire need of serious film producers.

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