

Asia-Europe Cultural Festival Podcast Series Transcript

Podcast #3: Xavier de Lauzanne

Date released: 02 June 2023

Episode can be heard on: <https://culture360.asef.org/insights/asia-europe-cultural-festival-podcast-series-3-xavier-de-lauzanne/>

Grey Yeoh

Hello and welcome to the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival podcast series, a new initiative by the Asia-Europe Foundation, where we speak to artists from Asia and Europe who have been involved in one of our festivals in the past. My name is Grey Yeoh and I am the Project Manager at the Culture Department here at ASEF, and also the host of this podcast series. I am a Malaysian man in my 30s with mid-length black hair and I use the he/him pronouns. Now a little bit about the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival to set some context. The Asia-Europe Cultural Festival is a public arts festival, which celebrates the artistic expression and cultural diversity from Asia and Europe. The Festival serves as a platform to showcase brilliant artistic endeavours, while offering the stage for dialogue and knowledge sharing among the arts and cultural communities from the two regions. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in partnership with the European Union, co-organise this annual festival. As mentioned at the top of the episode, we will be delving a little bit deeper into what makes a cultural festival tick, the people at the heart of it - the artists. I'm going to be speaking with a few artists who have been involved in our festivals in the past few years. And I'm really interested in this, not to mention covering the wider overarching Asia and Europe relations of this whole project. Today, we will be speaking with Xavier de Lauzanne, a French filmmaker based in Cambodia. Welcome to the show, Xavier.

Xavier de Lauzanne

Thank you, Grey.

Grey

Well, let's start by telling us who you are, what you do, and also perhaps a helpful visual descriptor for our listeners to picture how you look like.

Xavier

Well, what I look like, I am one meter eighty tall, a little bit bald, and not so much hair with green eyes, and a very French guy (laughs).

Grey

Can you tell us a little bit about your background? As a filmmaker? How did you start making films?

Xavier

Actually, it was not my first work because I did some study on hotel management. And but the cinema was a passion. And so I've worked about 10 years in this field, in hotels. And then I decided to change, to buy video camera and start to do some film. I was traveling a lot. So as I decided to focus on some people that I met during my travels, and this is why I start to do some documentary films. And so after around the years 2000 in Cambodia. Then I opened a production company in France with [some] friends. And then I did some documentary films for the television, and then to feature length documentary film for cinema.

Grey

What about documentary films that really captured you and got you deeper into, into this field.

Xavier

As I said to you, I didn't do any cinema school. And so I'm really focused on the real life. I work a lot on the NGO fields, social fields. And so I'm concern a lot about people, and how the people reach a better life. You see, and the focus a lot about also the importance of the culture, or nation, people as

an identity, and focus a lot about the real life. And maybe this is why now I'm doing documentaries films but I might I think now to go in, in in the feature film or so.

Grey

Can you share with us a little bit about what you do as a filmmaker, you know, there are many roles - there's producing, there's director of photography, there's the camera person - what is it that you are really interested in when you're making your film?

Xavier

I can do everything, actually. Because as I said, I was not trained, in that fields and so I learn by myself. I start to do some film by buying a video camera, you see. In 2000, I stay around one year between Cambodia and Vietnam because before I was living for three years in Hanoi for NGO projects. I had this small camera, and I take a lot of pictures. And then I tried to do a documentary film with that. But I did all the mistakes. You see, I didn't write the story, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to tell, I didn't focus in some only one character or two character to see. And this is how I, I've learned. So I did the shooting, I did the editing, it was my own finance, I produced by myself. And this is how I start. Now have a producing company and I work so with some other producers, but I still holding the camera. You see and it's very, very important for me to hold the camera and to shoot by myself, and then I'm working with an editor to edit the movie.

Grey

Yeah, that's, that's really good. I think a lot of the times people start by, you know, learning and making mistakes. And that's where you make the most out of it. You learn from those mistakes and you know, become better that way.

Xavier

Yeah, exactly. It's you know, the cinema is it's an artistic work is very easy compared to before. It's very easy to buy a camera, and to have a computer and to start a shoot, you see. So I had the chance to start like this. This is what the beginning of the video camera. So this is thanks to these new technologies that I could start on that work.

Grey

What we are going to talk about next is actually your experience in Europe and in Asia, the stories that you want to tell. What makes you fascinated with the two regions and the people who live here? You mentioned identity, the people and their stories. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Xavier

Yeah, it's I talk about identity. But identity is linked with my last film, which is 'The Perfect Motion', about the Royal Ballet in Cambodia. This film, 'The Perfect Motion', it's the fifth film that I did for cinema. The link between myself and the region is as [a] French [national], we have a common story with two countries in Asia, Vietnam and Cambodia, you see. So in 1996, I came to Hanoi, and I spent three years in Hanoi. I was working for an NGO for a restaurant and hotel school to help the poor children to be trained in that field. And so those three years was a great experience for me, and I discovered Vietnam. And I fell in love with this country, really. So it creates bond between where I am and this country and I get interested, the common history between France and Vietnam. Then after that I came back to France, I got married and had some children. And so I came back to Cambodia because I know some people, Christian and Marie-France des Pallieres. They had an NGO, the name is "Pour un Sourire d'Enfant", for the smile of a child. And they created this NGO in 1996, they have the children's around this very poor environment to have a better life and to go to school, to have an education, and they created a school. Now this project is one of the most important in Cambodia. And so I came back in 2013, to start to do a movie about this story.

[audio of the trailer of the film 'Les Pepites' / Little Gems play for a few seconds, with speakers speaking in Khmer language and French]

Xavier

The name [of this film] is 'Les Pepites' in French, 'Little Gems'. This was a very ambitious documentary film. And so after that we released this film in cinema in France. And this was one of the greatest success in cinema in France in 2016. It was two very great important experience with me, one in Vietnam. There's this NGO in Hanoi, one in Cambodia with this film in Phnom Penh. And then there I've met [HRH] Prince Tesso Sisowath. He is a member of the royal family. And he talked to me about the Royal Ballet, and he was working with the Princess Bhuppa Devi. [HRH Princess] Bhuppa Devi, she was the first daughter of the [HM] King Sihanouk. And she was director of the Royal Ballet. And so he asked me if I would be able to think about a movie about the Royal Ballet. I did some research about the story and discovered a very incredible story. You see, as a French [national], I didn't know if I wanted to do a movie about the Cambodia Royal Ballet because I didn't know anything about this kind of art and dance and I'm not Cambodian. I'm not Khmer. But I discovered is the story about Aguste Rodin, you know, the very famous French sculptor, and he met the dancers of the Royal Ballet in France at the beginning of the last century. And so he was very, very impressed about the Cambodia Royal Ballet. And so he decide to do some sketches about the dancers, and now they are in a museum of Rodin in Paris. And since this story, which was a link between the France and the Royal Ballet, so as a French [national], I said, oh okay, if Rodin has this love with the Royal Ballet, so okay, as a French maybe I can tell the story. And since this time, there is a story of the Royal Ballet until now.

[audio of the trailer of the film 'The Perfect Motion' play for a few seconds, with speakers speaking in Khmer language]

Xavier

What I've discovered is this kind of very ancient art is so important for Cambodia to rebuild an identity. The art is crucial, it's very important to know who you. You see, so this is why I decided to focus on that project.

[audio of the trailer of the film 'The Perfect Motion' play for a few seconds, with speakers speaking in Khmer language continues...]

Grey

That's, that's amazing. Thank you for giving us a history, brief history of how you came to the film. Now, the film "The Perfect Motion" was screened at the last Asia-Europe Cultural Festival in Brussels. What was the reaction of the audiences there when they watched the film?

Xavier

It's very interesting because I did this movie as a movie in between the two worlds, you see. Between Europe and between Asia and I really wanted that audience could be involved in that movie, as a European also as an Asia or as a Khmer, you see. Because for me, it's a very universal story. It's not only the story on Cambodia, is how a nation can have an identity through the arts, after a war, after a big crisis. So this is concern many countries now. And so I was very happy because the audience is very aware about the topic and very moved about the movie and about the story, and about the characters on the movie.

Grey

Yeah, I was going to bring this up as well, where the film also premiered in Cambodia just earlier this year. And of course, you have His Royal Highness in the audience as well watching it. What was the reaction of Cambodians and Khmer people when they watch the film?

Xavier

You know that we released the film in Cambodia in the cinema at the beginning of last April. This was the first feature length documentary film which got a nationwide release in Cambodia. It is the first one because in the cinema in Cambodia, you can never see any documentary films. You can see a film about ghosts, horror film, or American blockbusters. This was a very first experience. And we

did a premiere with the Kings - His Highness Norodom Sihamoni and was in Chaktomuk Theatre with many VIP people. And it was an incredible experience because the King was very, very moved about the movie. And after the screening he stayed quite a long time with me to talk about the movie. He was, he was very impressed. And he said to me that it's so important for Cambodia to release this kind of movie. And then after this premiere, we released the movie in the cinema. And what happened is, was a great, huge success in Cambodia, you see. We had more than 10,000 people who buy a ticket to go to the cinema to watch this movie. You see 10,000 people in some others big countries is not so much. But in a tiny country as Cambodia, 10,000 people who decided to go to the cinema to buy tickets to see this movie, this was great. This was a really great experience. And most of the people, they were young. It's not the old people, you see, who came. It's not the important people from the high society who came to the cinema. It's young people, it's many students. We have also some stars, the movie stars, and the music stars, you see, who came to the cinema, and rented some hall to show the movie to their fans. You see, so many, many, many people was talking about the movie, in the social networks, or so, so it was really an amazing experience.

Grey

That's fantastic. Congratulations on the success. Now we're coming to the end of the podcast. And I'd like to ask you a little bit about your thoughts on, you know, generally the Asia and Europe cultural relations.

Xavier

Yeah, it's for me, you see, I'm living in Cambodia. And I can experience each day, how the gap is huge, between Europe and Asia and between a French guy as I am and Cambodia. It's really two different worlds, two different way to think, to talk, to experience the priority and etcetera. But this is what is very interesting for me. I like to be in this gap. You see, because every day you discover something different. It's very easy for us to live in Cambodia, because people are so nice, you see. And so the relationships are easy in the street. But it's not easy to get some real friends. This is a very big challenge. You see, because the culture are so different, the way of life are so different. But this is what I like, actually you see. I like to discover the others. I like to try to fill in this gap and to be someone else. I still stay a very French guy. You see, I don't pretend to be Khmer, will never be Khmer. I will never be an Asian guy, but I use my culture, you see, to try to discover another culture. This is for me a very, very rich experience.

Grey

Great, Xavier, thank you so much. We are at the end of our show and it's really enlightening to hear about your experience and of course your film at the festival. Listeners, do keep a lookout for our next episode of the podcast where we will speak to yet another artists who was involved in our festival in one way or another. I like to thank Xavier for his time with us today.

Xavier

Thank you. Thank you. Grey.

Grey

And this is Grey Yeoh, Project Manager at the Asia-Europe Foundation Culture Department signing off. Thank you for listening and goodbye.