

# From word to film



(l-r) Sinema producer Nicholas Chee with directors Sanif Olek, Wee Li Lin, Don Aravind and Kenny Tan

Appreciate local literature—be it poetry, a short story or a novel—that's the aim of Utter, an initiative developed by the Singapore Writer's Festival. Now in its fourth year (and acting as a pre-festival event for SWF 2014 later in November), Utter presents adaptations of local writing in various forms (including theatre productions and films in the past). This year's programme, commissioned by the National Arts Council and produced by Sinema Media, features four short films by local directors based on Singaporean short stories—one in each of our four official languages. Now, after ten weeks of going through the production process, the directors have completed their projects—here, they give you a glimpse into each.

## Hui Jia (Going Home) Dir: Kenny Tan

In Mandarin and Hokkien with English subtitles. 10 min.

Based on *Hui Jia (Going Home)*, from a collection of short stories by Chinese author Lin Jin, which centres on an old man as he journeys back to his former residence and comes face-to-face with the bleak reality of growing old.

An alum of Temasek Design School, director Tan has clinched a number of awards, including the 2003 Media Development Authority of Singapore Course Gold Medal, as well as Overall Best Film at last year's ciNE65 Short Film Competition for *Priceless*. This project stars non-professional actor Michael Tan—in his film debut—as the central character, Uncle Lim. **Book versus film** 'The short film follows the original source material pretty closely,' Tan explains. 'However, I included additional layers into the story to further explore the characters and their relationships with the situation and the environment. Other than the obvious commentary on the vulnerabilities of ageing, if you look closely at the film, there is also a certain level of social-political subtext about our progressive socio-urban development. The film was shot at a charming old neighbourhood in Mountbatten, which is due to be torn down within the next two years.'

Ultimately, Tan says his take is 'a simple and honest Singaporean short film that I hope will be able to entertain and promote conversation. We decided on a simple, naturalistic look for a raw and vulnerable tone,

and we took the opportunity to capture the architectural elements of the old estate that we were filming in.' **The experience** 'To be honest, I'm not really good with my Chinese and I hardly read Chinese novels,' Tan admits. 'So when I was initially tasked to do a Chinese story adaptation, I was afraid of messing it up. I wasn't sure if I could understand the gist of the stories. To me, Chinese stories are full of profound meanings and underlying subtext, especially when certain words or sentences could have multiple connotations. But my fears were laid to rest when I read the local Chinese short stories recommended by NAC—in particular, *Going Home* was a story that appealed to me because of its simplicity as well as the connection to my own experiences with my grandmother. It is a story Singaporeans can connect to, especially with the recent focus on our silver generation.'

## Tin Kosong (Empty Cans) Dir: Sanif Olek

In Malay with English subtitles. 10 min.

Based on *Tin Kosong* by Muhammad Salihin Sulaiman, from his collection of short fiction tales, *Anugerah Bulan*

*Buat Bonda*. Director Olek, one of Singapore's most celebrated TV and film directors (he's been awarded numerous Best Director and Best Drama Series nods since 1996, and his debut feature film, *Sayang Disayang*, recently earned him a Special Jury Prize at the 2013 SalaMindanaw International Film Festival, and closed out the Southeast Asian Film Festival earlier this year) offers his take on the story. It revolves around a tin-collector named Somad, who comes across a diverse range of people while roving around on the job, and ends off his day by speaking to fellow workers about life in modern Singapore. **Book versus film** 'The story is written from a first person's perspective in simple yet concise, hard-hitting prose,' Olek says. 'It's a dark collage of memories—it paints a realistic picture of modern society and contemporary Singapore. Based on the original text, I could have adapted *Tin Kosong* into a linear, albeit melodramatic narrative visual structure. However, upon introspection, I wanted to challenge myself as a filmmaker and decided to include a witty, over-the-top musical element. I felt I could adapt the narrative into a fluid structure

Now in its fourth year, the Utter initiative aims to showcase various adaptations of Singaporean works of writing. This year, four local film directors have been commissioned to produce short films—one in each official language. **Benita Lee** hears more about the projects



Hui Jia (Going Home)



That Loving Feeling



Tin Kosong (Empty Cans)



Un Vasalli (At Your Doorstep)

visually, yet maintain the dark tone of the story, by putting in the musical fantasy element to highlight the ironic text in an allegorical outlook on modern society. It's a dose of retro fun, with a dash of witty introspection.' **The experience** 'I was initially worried if my lead actor, Khalid Baboo, would be able to pull off the song-and-dance sequence, but my anxiety was unwarranted. Watching him on set, I gained a newfound respect for the veteran actor for being able to pull off both the musical segment and the dramatic scenes.'

## That Loving Feeling Dir: Wee Li Lin

In English with subtitles, 19 min.

Based on *Homecoming*, by the late critically-acclaimed Singaporean author (and neurosurgeon) Gopal Baratham, from his collection, *Memories that Glow in the Dark*. Set in the '60s, this period romance touches on issues of forbidden love when an 18-year-old teen falls for an older man, much to the chagrin of her mother.

**Book versus film** 'The original story is quite different from our adaptation, which is a quirky period love story with great dancing,' describes Wee,

one of Singapore's most prominent female filmmakers, with almost ten shorts and two feature films (*Gone Shopping and Forever*) to her name—many of which have won awards at local and international film festivals. 'Su Ching (the co-writer) and I adapted what we felt spoke to us and would be cinematic, and transcribed that into something of our own. We liked the character of Ena and her idiosyncrasies, and how she and Gomez (her love interest) met at a church party and square-danced together. The original story had a strong sexual undercurrent that we downplayed in our adaptation; it manifests in how the mother wants to repress her daughter's freedom.' **The experience** 'I've never handled a film with such major dance choreography, so that was a challenge. But I was very fortunate to have a wonderful choreographer, Shah, who helped us tremendously and had such infectious energy. I was also very fortunate to have kind friends and strangers who responded to my Facebook casting calls and appeared as dancers and extras. It was a tremendously fun and crazy experience!' exclaims Wee. 'One

particularly memorable experience for me was when a dancer's 70-year-old father came to accompany his daughter and ended up being cast and in the film as a dancer. I think he had a great time; in every shot, he was beaming. At the end of the shoot, he hugged me and thanked everyone for the experience. It doesn't matter what stage of life you're at—if you have the courage to plunge yourself into something that's out of your comfort zone, it can be really rewarding.'

## Un Vasalli (At Your Doorstep) Dir: Don Aravind

In Tamil with English subtitles. 10 min.

Based on *Peaks*, written by award-winning female writer/playwright/director Kamaladevi Aravindan, which tells the tale of a widowed woman languishing from the pain of perpetual loneliness as she thinks back to the days of old when her family was still with her.

**Book versus film** 'The film's narrative has a slight modification from the story in the book,' says young director Aravind, who has several short films in his repertoire. 'After discussions with a screenwriter, we felt we needed to reduce the

characters for the film. I could relate to the story as the main character, Grandma Kamatchi, reminded me of my own late grandma—I witnessed her tearing up whenever she used to talk about her sons, their wives and her grandchildren—so we stuck to the story's central character, though it has a very different ending.'

**The experience** 'It was not a simple film to do, though it might not appear like that on screen,' reveals Aravind. 'We shot through two nights, which needed different sets of energy and discipline to execute. No one from the production team understood Tamil except me, but as we shot through the nights, they felt a beautiful energy for it. This reassured me that language and ethnicity should not be a barrier to any piece of art.'

He adds: 'most films, when adapted from books, get heavily criticised for not doing the story justice. So I hope I have brought out the characters in a visual format that does justice to the author. Audience expectations are scary for every filmmaker—I hope they will like the film!'

Utter 2014 is at GV Vivocity on 30 Jul & 3 Aug.