

By Invitation

MDA deserves a bouquet for taking a risk with 7 Letters

The SG50 movie 7 Letters hits the sweet spot, reminding us of the multi-variegated hues of home



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For The Straits Times

7 Letters, a collection of seven short films, moved me to tears. But I don't know why.

The last scene of the last movie, Grandma Positioning System (GPS), was particularly moving. When the young Chinese boy jumped out of the car and ran back to his grandparents' graves to continue telling stories of places that had gone or changed, I was particularly moved.

But why should I have been moved? I was born a Hindu. We cremate. We don't have graves. I have never visited a grave to pay my respects to a loved one.

Perhaps it was nostalgia that moved me. The young boy was carrying on the stories that his grandmother had told in the previous years of malls and highways replacing familiar landmarks. As director Kelvin Tong said: "Geography is never just geography, and buildings are never just buildings. They are repositories of shared memories for a lot of people."

My soul, like that of many Singaporeans, feels a deep yearning for the places we experienced in our youth. The seven films gently immersed us in the very different Singapore which we used to know.

The scenes of the Tanjong Pagar railway station in the second-last movie, Parting by Boo Junfeng, also brought back vivid memories. Many times had I gone to the station to receive or send off family and friends. I also remember boarding a train there to begin a journey which eventually took me to Bangkok. The Malay Peninsula seemed so close then. Several of the movies resurrected these old

sentimental associations.

I felt no nostalgia for the British Empire, the subject of *The Flame*, the movie by K. Rajagopal. This was strange. In the first 15 years of my life, I was a British subject. Like many in my generation, my mind was colonised. We believed then that the British were a superior race. They lived in a better country. However, strangely, even though many in my generation had an aching desire to migrate to Britain or its key colonial offshoots, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, I never experienced that desire. Something held me to Singapore soil.

The most charming movie for me was *Bunga Sayang* by Royston Tan. As Straits Times film correspondent John Lui writes: "The use of period detail is both understated and evocative... Its humanity and humour speak volumes of Tan's eye for visual storytelling."

Kenneth Paul Tan, my colleague at the LKY School who has written a book on Singapore cinema, describes Tan as having "an intuitive eye for visual beauty, an innate sensitivity to music, a cheeky and flamboyant sense of humour, and most of all a talent for putting together films that are simple yet challenging on so many levels".

In the film, a little Chinese boy returns home to find the water supply cut off in his Housing Board flat because his father had not paid the utilities bill. His mother advises him to bathe in one of the neighbours' homes. Fortunately, he finds a flat occupied by an old Malay woman. A wildly improbable bonding takes place. The little boy, who speaks no Malay, sings eloquently in Malay with his new friend. And I was deeply moved.

The Malay dimension of the Singapore soul has become less visible in recent years. Malay culture has always been a strong element. However, modernisation and urban development have erased many of its traces.

This is why it was brilliant to begin 7 Letters with a movie featuring a Pontianak, in the film titled *Cinema* by Eric Khoo. The

haunting scenes of a young Malay woman singing in the forest will remain in my imagination for a long time. As Khoo noted in the conclusion, in the 1950s it was common to have Malay, Indian and Chinese movie-makers collaborating in Singapore film studios, which united the sensibilities of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. I don't know how or why this tradition died. As a child, I remember that there were Cathay Keris film studios along East Coast Road, but they left before I had any chance of peeking into them.

I hope therefore that with the success of 7 Letters, directed by seven local film-makers, Royston Tan, Tan Pin Pin, Jack Neo, Boo Junfeng, Eric Khoo, K. Rajagopal and Kelvin Tong, we will make an effort to strengthen the movie industry of Singapore.

We may not make a lot of money producing films. Very often, we will end up losing money. But even if Singapore film-making manages to become a commercially successful enterprise, as it was in the golden age of film-making in the 1950s and 1960s, we will actually achieve something even more important.

Local movies express our innermost feelings about the past and hopes for the future. As Royston Tan, who initiated the 7 Letters project, said, each film represents "a Singaporean telling stories from his own eyes. I think it's a homecoming experience where we can connect with our roots, our present and, most importantly, our future. With a better understanding

of all these, we can create the future we want."

I believe that our authors, playwrights and artists will agree with this. Let's give our movie-makers free rein to tell us stories that will bind us together more closely.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was dead right in highlighting the importance of preserving and strengthening the Singapore identity in the next 50 years in his speech at the Ho Rih Hwa Lecture on June 30. Just as Hollywood told stories that helped to forge the American identity and Bollywood helped to forge the Indian identity, we need our own Hollywood or Bollywood.

To become financially viable, our Hollywood will face an uphill struggle. This is why it was wise for the Media Development Authority to sponsor 7 Letters as part of the SG50 celebrations.

Indeed, for me personally, 7 Letters has been one of the best elements of our SG50 year. As journalist Genevieve Loh of Today put it, 7 Letters "transcends the limits of its form, combining the advantages of its genre with heartfelt sincerity from its makers who are free from the constraints of narrative, and thus free to simply paint their impressionistic portraits of their homeland and create a living tableau of our island city-state".

The movies brought joy and reminded us of our common roots. K. Rajagopal pointed out that "Singapore is represented by so

many different cultures and different voices... Anything that represents a slice of Singapore means something".

With their seven different slices of Singapore, the seven directors made us understand better why we call ourselves Singaporeans.

Boo put it well when he said: "We all have our unique ways of identifying with Singapore or being Singaporean. But at the heart of it is a sense of love for this place we call home."

One of my biggest concerns for Singapore in the future is that we may be developing a public service that is becoming risk-averse.

A risk-averse public service is not likely to invest in a money-losing movie industry. This is why we should send a bouquet to the MDA. It has demonstrated that it is not too risk-averse.

By sponsoring 7 Letters, it could have ended up with seven slightly subversive movies that could have veered off the official national narrative.

But because it took that chance, we ended up with seven seductive and beautifully made movies which strengthened the real national narrative of an improbable society of different races and religions that forged a common soul. We should toast this unique Singapore soul that is our own creation.

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