

ENTERTAINMENT

"Ilo Ilo" and Anthony Chen's next big challenge — the Singapore audience

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Anthony Chen has won the world's attention with his Cannes-winning film "Ilo Ilo" but with butterflies in his stomach, the Singaporean director is hoping the film's local cinema release will also win over the Singaporean audience.



SINGAPORE: Was it *that* good? Or are they just being kind? Those were thoughts that went through the mind of the cast and crew of "Ilo Ilo" when the Singapore-made film received a 15 minute standing ovation after the film's screening at Cannes in May.

Now, the audience in Singapore can get the answer to those questions themselves, with the local-themed feature film opening in cinemas on 29 August.

The film that delves into the life of a Singapore family and their Filipino maid at the beginning of the 1997 Asian financial crisis is helmed by a talented cast comprising Malaysian actress Yeo Yann Yann, veteran Singaporean actor Chen Tianwen and Filipina film actress Angeli Bayani.

Although the film has been warmly received at sneak screenings in Singapore over the past few days, with a standing ovation (again) at the gala premiere on August 24, the movie's scriptwriter and director Anthony Chen can't help but have butterflies in his tummy.

"I feel the pressure... especially bringing the film back to Singapore. I'm really nervous about that because I don't think a film like this has been shown here before," said Chen, who picked up the Camera d'Or prize at the 66th Cannes Film Festival for his film.

While Chen feels that the Singaporean audience would be able to relate to the film and its characters, the young director still harbours some reservations.

"I have some worries, some concerns, because in Singapore only a few types of films will make it ... usually comedies," mused Chen at a recent media meeting.

"And specifically speaking, the film has won such a huge award, I don't know if everyone will expect too much of it," adding he is concerned that many would have formed opinions of "Ilo Ilo" even before seeing it.

But the work of the young Singaporean director which has been lauded by everyone — from Singapore's Prime Minister to Hollywood critics — contains a special surprise.

Those who expect dropped scenes from "Ilo Ilo" or behind-the-scene peeks, will have to re-think Anthony Chen.

Malaysian actress Yeo Yann Yann who played the expectant mother, was genuinely heavy with child as she became pregnant after being casted by Chen, who decided to change the film rather than replace the actress.

"I rewrote the entire script. The mother became pregnant, and I told Yeo Yann Yann, 'You dropped this huge bomb on me, I'm going to throw a huge bomb on you ... I'm going to shoot your delivery'," revealed Chen as he sat with a now svelte Yeo.

The actress jokingly added: "Anthony Chen is a ruthless man... For the sake of getting a good shot, he kept telling me 'Yann Yann - Cesarean, do a Cesarean', but I told him no, I want a natural birth — please don't curse me!"

But when the Malaysian actress ran into some complications during labour, Chen's wish came true.

"I think that Anthony is really... I think that for the sake of filming, he can sacrifice a lot of things. He can sacrifice me!" said Yeo with a laugh.

"He really is someone who will move forward courageously for film," she added in a voice brimming with admiration for Chen.

Since winning the award at Cannes, life for Chen has become rather overwhelming with the Singaporean director expected to dedicate the next one and a half years to promoting "Ilo Ilo" in different countries.

Still, that doesn't mean Chen isn't already itching to make his next film.

"I can't wait to make a second film to be honest," gushed Chen. "I'm sort of half-based in the UK now (and) I've actually been sent quite a number of scripts ... through my agent in the UK."

Although he can't say as yet what his next film will be, Chen is certain it "would probably be an English language crossover film" and may be set in Europe.

For now, Chen is only looking out for his baby, "Ilo Ilo" and like every parent, he holds the anxious hope that it will be welcomed with some love and appreciation from others.

"Walk into the cinema with an open mind... an open heart... Because I think whether you are Asian... or especially if you're Singaporean, you will definitely be able to feel for the characters."

- CNA/sf