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COVER STORY

# Lights, Camera, Action!

Evanna Ramly



Winning the top prize at BMW Shorties was a huge motivation for Tan

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In 2006, BMW Group Malaysia introduced a new cultural initiative that would provide local amateur filmmakers a platform to express their creativity and celluloid genius. To date, its popular short film competition called BMW Shorties has received more than 750 entries, many of which have since been screened at prestigious international film festivals in Cannes, New York, Rotterdam, Oberhausen, Rome and Clermont-Ferrand.

“BMW Shorties has journeyed a remarkable distance since it first undertook the task of providing a platform for aspiring Malaysian film enthusiasts to realise their potential,” said Han San Yung, managing director and CEO of BMW Group Malaysia.

“As a premium brand which understands the importance of cultural pursuits like filmmaking to a generation, the BMW Group is extremely humbled by the response we have recorded and the impact we have rendered in the local film industry through BMW Shorties. Having received over 600 short film entries and launched countless film talent into full-fledged careers, the BMW Shorties is honoured to have helped Malaysia build a bold legacy in filmmaking.”

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Sashi Ambi, head of corporate communications of BMW Group Malaysia, notes that it has been a humbling experience for BMW Group Malaysia to be able to share the passion, commitment and talent of its filmmakers with fellow Malaysians. "Our themes also reflect the success this initiative continues to enjoy."

Top prize winners of BMW Shorties receive a generous production grant of RM75,000 for their next work. Apart from the director, other talents are also recognised with awards for Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Production Design, Best Editing and Best Sound Design as well as a People's Choice Award.

The winner of the 2016 edition was Tan Ce Ding, whose short film *Hawa* tapped into the sci-fi genre, uncovering the relationship between humans and robots in a futuristic Malaysia. He continues this theme in his recently premiered film, *The Masseuse*.

Graduating from Sunway University with a diploma in performing arts and media, Tan first began his career as a production assistant, quickly advancing to assistant director and eventually sitting in the director's chair for numerous commercials.

Currently a film director at Naga DDB Tribal, he has won two Kancil Awards and also directed many independent short films including *Thanks for Saving Me*, *We Were the Best* and *Da Capo*. "When my team and I won, we immediately saw an opportunity to explore another angle for the sci-fi genre and further expand on the elements of the possible society of Malaysia in the future," says Tan who has sent in entries to BMW Shorties since 2010 and was a Top 10 finalist five times. "That was how *Hawa* came to be. *The Masseuse* was an interesting project as we had the chance to think about how robots and humans could interact in Kuala Lumpur."

Set in the future, *The Masseuse* is a surprisingly moving sci-fi love story between a humanoid masseuse and her technician who has a dark and disturbing past and an indisposed agenda. The film centres on the relationship between robots and humans in the future, and their roles in a developed society.



A scene from *The Masseuse*

Tan reveals he has always wanted to make a sci-fi film set in the near future. “Hawa was set in a post-apocalyptic world of zombies but *The Masseuse* is in a way more scientific. We also thought it would be cool to retain retro and contemporary elements, with a mixture of technology and sci-fi elements to build the story.”

At the end of the day, what is most important is the human factor. “We wanted to draw out human elements from both the human and the droid. The latter is not fully robotic so she has a human touch and even some human thoughts.”

Inspiration was his appreciation for sci-fi stories. “I’ve always been a person who aims to bring a story depicting normal humans facing abnormal adversities on screen. Even in *Hawa*, the concept was to show how normal Malaysian children would possibly live and react when faced with challenges in the future. In *The Masseuse*, I wanted to explore the emotional elements of humans and robots with the themes of love, hate, happiness, sadness and reluctance.”

The recent premiere was very timely, with moviegoers still reeling from the recent release of the similarly themed *Blade Runner 2049*.

“*Blade Runner* was definitely one of the films that inspired me, as did the *Star Wars* and *Alien* franchises, movies from the Seventies through to the Nineties, which was the golden era of science fiction in cinema,” he notes. “We used *Blade Runner* as our reference for some scenes – and (Hong Kong auteur) *Wong Kar Wai* films as well. It was quite cool to have these elements mixed together.”

His favourite directors include the aforementioned Wong, Ridley Scott (the director of the first Blade Runner), the Coen brothers, Steven Spielberg and Ang Lee. "For me, filmmaking is always down to two parts: The story and the human emotions."

"When you look at films by Scott, Spielberg and JJ Abrams, although they are set in a sci-fi world where everything is very futuristic with a lot of visual effects, the core value always goes back to mankind and human relationships. That's what we wanted to explore."

To further enrich knowledge of his craft, Tan watches plenty of independent movies from the West and the East. "That's something we can achieve in terms of practicality. Sundance Festival films set in an ordinary world but injected with scientific elements, and TV shows like Black Mirror."

In terms of Malaysian filmmakers, Tan is a huge fan of the late Yasmin Ahmad. "What I admire most about Yasmin was the whole genre she set up. Everyone followed her lead in heart-warming commercials and moving family stories. She was the first to move in that direction."

He also cites Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui and James Lee as pioneers of independent filmmaking in Malaysia. "I really admire how, in their early days, they could make feature films with probably just a three-man crew: a director, a cameraman and an actor. There was nothing fancy – everything was distilled to the story itself and those films won awards around the world. That's inspiring."

Tan has learned from experience the importance of working with the right mind set. "For years, we just wanted to win. Whatever we tried to structure or craft were specifically to win BMW Shorties," he recalls. "Looking back, it limited our creativity in a way. For Hawa, we didn't have the same intention. We had a story but not done specifically for BMW Shorties. It was only later that we thought it might suit the competition and we submitted it. I believe the change of mentality played a part in us finally winning."

"Besides creativity, filmmaking is about communication. Even if you had the greatest vision, if you can't communicate with your team, they won't be able to help you execute what's in your mind."

Then there is the filmmaker's ability to tell a story. "Often we have very good ideas but when we put them on paper and then translate the words into visuals, the process could change a lot of things. As a filmmaker, you need to have the ability to translate what's in your head from its original concept all the way to the final outcome."

He believes BMW Shorties does play an important role in shaping the local film industry. "It's the biggest and longest-running short film competition in Malaysia. Look at the filmmakers they have unearthed: Quek Shio Chuan, Chua Dick Woei, Shanjhey Kumar and Brandon Loh. They all have very successful careers now."

According to Tan, this platform was perhaps even more important back when the internet was not as advanced as it is today. "It was, and still is, a great way for young filmmakers to showcase their work. The funding will help them to shape a well-crafted film and push them to an international level."

He plans to turn *Hawa* and *The Masseuse* into full-length feature films. "I'm already developing the script for *Hawa* but I expect it to be a long journey."

But one that he is more than happy to take.

## **Bright Young Talents**

### **Catching up with two previous winners of BMW Shorties**

#### **Quek Shio Chuan**

Originally from Batu Pahat, Quek graduated with honours in Broadcasting from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. His first short film, *Guang*, won the BMW Shorties' grand prize in 2011 and it has since gone on to win multiple awards internationally, including the first Asian short film to win the Best Short Film Award at the 6th Alto Vicentino Film Festival in Santorso, Italy.

"*Guang* was my first film out of university. As a new commercial filmmaker, you need a show reel in order for clients to hire you, and winning BMW Shorties gained me a lot of traction. It was an incredible way to kick-start my career," he says.

"From the experience six years ago, I've learned so much, most importantly that one shouldn't be afraid to present an idea, and strive to turn an idea that you truly believe in into a film."

After working alongside Petronas, Samsung and Nissan, Quek is currently attached to Reservoir Production, a commercial film production company. "I'm currently working on the feature film version of *Guang*."

#### **Chua Dick Woei**

Known as the master of thriller, Chua took home the grand prize in 2012 with his riveting short film, *Murdered*. It was the first short film in the history of BMW Shorties to be nominated and awarded in six other categories. He next directed *Pizza* with the production grant.

"Many remembered me for the win and it has brought many more directing opportunities, especially for commercials," he says. Indeed, Chua has been riding high ever since, including directing the music video for local singer Bell Yu Tian's hit ballad *Yu Shi Tian De* (Rain is Sweet).



“I’ve just done Celcom’s Deepavali commercial. Now I’m working on a short film for Pangkor Island Festival – it will be an exciting collaboration.” Chua now helms his own production company, D1 Productions.

When asked what he learned from the experience, he replies: “Always work with your heart, and people will feel it.”

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