



SILVER SCREEN VISIONARY

Editorial Vernon Ramesar Photography Supplied



There's a twinkle in Chin's eye when he talks about his businesses

Back in 2002, seeing a big-screen movie in T&T meant a visit to an ageing cinema and sitting in the dark hoping a roach wouldn't run over you. That all changed with the opening of MovieTowne Port of Spain. And the man responsible is Derek Chin.

Sitting across from him at his flagship location, it's impossible not to be struck by his enthusiasm, which is as infectious as it was the last time I interviewed him many years ago. There's a twinkle in his eye when he talks about his businesses and a boyish smile that belies the fact he's now in his early 60s. "At MovieTowne, I'm about happiness, I'm about good things. I have to maintain my smiley face," he says.

I ask him about the process of getting investors on board 15 years ago. "Everyone thought I was insane, and there were a lot of negatives and challenges," he muses. "Anything that is change, you just hit a wall. People don't like change, so I had to do a lot of hard selling." His smile disappears for a moment as he laments the lack of innovation in the country. "We don't invent many things in Trinidad, we don't create many things. This is going back 40 years... we never pioneer anything." But his trademark humour quickly resurfaces as he remembers telling the bank, "Bill Gates could never be a Trinidadian. Just imagine this man going in to talk about Microsoft or a computer?"

"I didn't just want to make a cinema," he says, "I wanted to have an entertainment complex and whatever comes, comes." His speech quickens as he notes, "Now we have casinos, we have restaurants, we have shopping, we have Fiesta Plaza [a popular open-air stage area that hosts musical performances]."

In the tradition of 'if you build it they will come', MovieTowne Port of Spain's popularity exceeded even Chin's expectations. "I knew it would be different," he says. "I didn't know it would catch on the way it did. People now have it as an icon. When you go to Port of Spain you have to go to MovieTowne." Most locals would undoubtedly agree.



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Chin reminds me of another phenomenon for which he thinks MovieTowne doesn't get enough credit: "This whole creative industry with regard to film. There was nothing before 2002, there was nothing." With passion flaring in his eyes again, he says, "Look at what we have today. We have premieres, we have the Trinidad and Tobago Film Company, we have FLOW involved, we have locals making films now. There are many different film festivals."

Following his initial success in Port of Spain, he's expanded the MovieTowne franchise over the years to Chaguanas, Tobago and San Fernando. His first regional outlet, MovieTowne Guyana, is slated to open in early 2018. "We have a situation where MovieTowne will change Guyana," he says, "just as it had an impact on social life and entertainment in Trinidad." He's already thinking past Guyana, though, and is looking forward to refurbishing the Port of Spain flagship once that project is complete. Planning for the future seems to be part of Chin's DNA and he says his focus is on "continuing to develop the movie business and catering, and really trying to outdo ourselves every time."

Despite his successes and the expansion of the franchise, his most ambitious project 'Streets of the World', a massive theme park addition to the Port of Spain location, has remained frustratingly out of his grasp. At one point the project became something of a political football. I ask him if he considers this his greatest disappointment. "I am directed by the Lord in that respect and He tells me what to do," he says, "so when Streets of the World was hot and sweaty and enthusiastic, and I'm getting blocked and blocked, I figured the time isn't right."

As he prepares to get back to managing his MovieTowne empire, Chin leaves a few words of advice for those thinking of starting their own business: "It requires a different type of person to actually feel that they can be an entrepreneur and they can take risks. You have to like business, you have to like to make money." He adds with a wink, "I don't like to spend money, I like to make money. ■"



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