



PHOTOS: ASHLEIGH SIM, GSMRJCT-MEDIA

Film-maker Ho Tzu Nyen (above) went to Cannes with a movie that took 11 days to shoot

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film correspondent

A made-in-Singapore independent feature, shot on a shoestring budget in less than a fortnight, makes it to the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Not just as a film entry, but for the Director's Fortnight showcase.

Film-maker Eric Khoo accomplished that feat last year. This year, Ho Tzu Nyen did it with his first feature film, *Here*.

The movie, which opens at The Picturehouse tomorrow, is about a murderer (played by artist John Low) who is sent to a mental hospital.

French critics were kind to the movie. The reviewer from French newspaper L'Humanite called it "cerebral" and "baffling", though it has a "beautiful aesthetic".

Getting to Cannes is quite a feat for any director, let alone for a first-timer. Especially since the graduate of the University of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts is better known as a multimedia artist in Singapore.

It was Ho's friend, Filipino film critic Alexis Tio-seco, who proposed submitting the film to Cannes even before it was completed.

Ho, 32, lives in Tampines with his wife Stephanie Goh, also 32, who is his project manager. He says: "Our team thought it was a long shot because none of us had any experience in Cannes. No one there would have heard of us."

The film's confirmed selection for the Director's Fortnight arrived last Christmas Eve. "It really made Christmas for us," Ms Goh says. The couple have no children.

Ho says his Cannes outing in May was an eye-opener. While he found the reverence for film and the big-money wheeling and dealing "a strange mix", he was heartened by the demand for all types of cinema, not just mainstream Hollywood fare.

"You see that there are many possible paths for a film-maker to take," he says.

His own path to Cannes has been a long and winding one. "After I graduated in 2000, I tried to make a living by trying to win painting competitions."

And he did win the top prize of \$8,000 for his painting, *Entropy*, in the abstract category of the UOB Painting Of The Year competition in 2001. That same year, he topped the Nokia Arts Awards' Eye On The World Painting Competition with his painting, *I/Eye Is Another*.

"My greatest interest has always been in moving images," he says of his transition to video art and then film.

The fan of Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky says he has been teaching himself the art and theory of cinema since his return from Australia. He has received commissions from bodies such as the National Museum, for which he helped create the award-winning panoramic film, *Sejarah Singapura*, in 2006. He also sells "very limited edition" video works on DVD.

His work on *Sejarah Singapura* also introduced him to the production house gsmprjct-media, which co-produced his debut feature.

Here was funded by a variety of sources, including the National Arts Council, drama company TheatreWorks, where Ho is creative-in-residence and production houses M'GO Films, Akanga Film Asia, Oak3 Films and Ho's own Tzological Films. While the producers declined to reveal the film's budget, on average, such made-in-Singapore films cost around \$200,000, not including marketing costs.

Ho managed to complete his movie in only 11 days, with lots of planning. "I had to make the film 100 times in my own mind. While writing the script, I was also planning the camera moves and editing points," he says.

The multimedia artist also reduced shooting time by holding a month of rehearsals at The Substation, where he is an associate artist.

It helped that there was just one main location - View Road Hospital in Woodlands, an empty building that was once a mental institution.

The film will be screened at the prestigious Karlov Vary International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia next month, where it is in the Open Eyes category alongside films from acclaimed directors such as Lars von Trier and Michael Haneke.

His next film, *Endless Day*, will be a "fantasy action romance" inspired by the wuxia martial arts movies of Hong Kong director King Hu.

Ho is a fan of the way the famed director of classics such as *Come Drink With Me* (1966) and *A Touch Of Zen* (1971) composed his frames. Shooting is scheduled to start late next year, and Ho is now looking for financing.

"King Hu started as a painter as well," he says.
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Here opens tomorrow exclusively at The Picturehouse.

Going nowhere

review drama
HERE (PG)

86 minutes/Opens tomorrow/★★★☆☆

The story: After He Zhiyuan (John Low) murders his wife, he is placed in Island Hospital, a mental asylum situated off the shores of mainland Singapore. The now-mute Zhiyuan tries to adjust to life within the institution, and forms a relationship with a kleptomaniac Beatrice (Jo Tan).

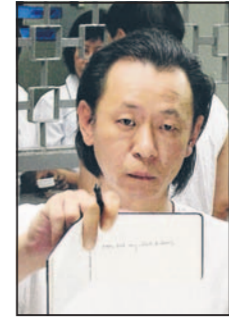
dave chua

Selected for the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, artist-film-maker Ho Tzu Nyen's first film has some interesting ideas. But while it starts off promisingly, this minimalist effort never quite achieves its full potential.

It is fairly straightforward, mixing elements of documentary into its story, but the end result lacks any narrative momentum. It utilises the theme of repetition, yet never manages to achieve any rhythm in the storytelling, and a too-skeletal love story frames the piece.

Viewpoints switch between the doctors and patients in the institution, and long segments of song add to the film's drift nature.

The "videocure" that the hospital uses



on its patients harks back to Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda's *Afterlife*, where the recently dead shoot a video of one memory to bring to the next world, but *Here* is not as well executed or satisfying.

Part of the problem lies in the characters, who are mostly two-dimensional, walking maladies. The cast, made up of professionals and amateurs, has a hard time with the thin material. The more interesting characters, such as a patient who employs his toast-mastering skills to conceive a mostly meaningless speech about vitamins, are rarely revisited.

The film, scripted by Ho, also offers no insights into the main character Zhiyuan (played by John Low, above) or the motivation for the murder. A scene where two guards and he stand still upon arriving at the hospital sums up the totality of his character development.

While there are moments in *Here* that are quite moving, most will find this art film a confounding piece of work. In the end, *Here* never really goes anywhere.

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