

My dad, my No. 1 fan

When film-maker Royston Tan's movie *12 Lotus* wasn't doing well, his dad rallied his friends to go watch it

Relatively Speaking
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Whatever critics may say about his films, and however well or badly he fares at the box office, Singapore film-maker Royston Tan has one fan he can always count on – his dad, Mr Tan Chin Cheng, 61.

The loyal father calls up his friends and relatives to watch his son's movies, even when they are arty ones he does not understand, such as *4:30* (2006), about a latchkey kid and his mother's suicidal tenant.

Such is his support that when Royston's most recent movie, *12 Lotus*, was not garnering ticket sales, he called on his friends as reinforcements to fill up the cinemas.

"It hurts me to see that the cinema was only half-full. After all, he had worked so hard," says Mr Tan of the poor box-office performance of the 2008 sequel to *881*, a movie about the colourful getai industry in Singapore.

But even fathers cannot move mountains – *12 Lotus* posted less than \$1 million in takings, compared to the \$3 million for *881*, and so, with a budget of \$1.3 million, it did not break even.

Still, his son must have made him proud by receiving the Singapore Youth Award in the arts and culture category last month.

And the film-maker's latest project – a full-length documentary feature titled *Old Places*, which premiered on MediaCorp's Okto channel earlier this month as the channel's National Day Filmart Special, would have had extra poignancy for his father. It was inspired by changes in the neighbourhood Tan junior grew up in.

Thirty-four-year-old Royston owes much to his dad, too, in his rise to become one of Singapore's top film-makers.

Mr Tan's parenting style was to give his son unwavering support, even when teachers constantly complained about him and he could barely pass the examinations for most of his subjects except art.

Mr Tan and his wife of 35 years, Madam Ng Peng Hwy, 56, both retirees, never gave up on their son, believing that he was talented in the arts and that one day, he would shine in this.

They sent him to art classes and encouraged him to take part in art competitions.

Never once did they compare him to his younger and more studious brother, Ethan, 32, now a public relations executive.

Even when Royston expressed his wish to become a film-maker after he graduated from Temasek Polytechnic in 1997 with a diploma in visual communication, they had no objections, whereas other parents might have insisted on a more traditional career.

Said a grateful Royston, who lives with his parents in a four-room flat in Serangoon North: "When I was young, my parents told me that they did not give up on me, so I shouldn't give up on myself.

"They have taught me that failure is part and parcel of life. What will be mine will be mine eventually."

What were your growing-up years like?

Royston: I grew up in a kampung in Lorong



ST PHOTO: MARYANNE TAN

Chuan, where my parents ran a provision shop. I would go on delivery trips with my father in a blue pick-up truck every day. He would let me change the gears while he was driving.

When I was 10, we moved to an HDB flat. Then, I took part in more art competitions and spent less time with dad as he did not run the provision shop anymore.

Mr Tan: He was very mischievous and would use the biscuits in the provision shop as Lego bricks and mess them up. The two brothers would run around the shop. I hardly caned him or disciplined him as I was very busy running the shop and delivering goods. I felt guilty that he was left alone most of the time.

What was your parenting style like?

Royston: My parents had a very "kam-pung" simplicity. They didn't pressure me to perform well academically or compare me with my cousins.

My dad also shows love through food. He is the head of the kitchen, and takes pains to whip up good food for a simple dinner. There used to be an unspoken rule to have dinner together at 6pm daily. Now, we make it a point to have dinner every weekend. Even when I cannot make it, my parents will leave my portion in the refrigerator so I can eat it for supper when I get home.

Mr Tan: I take it step by step. Children take time to learn, too. I do not think what kind of future I want for them. They may not be able to do it, too. I love to cook for my family and eat together.

You had some ups and downs in your career, from run-ins with the censorship board to poor box-office showings. Do you seek solace in your parents?

Royston: When I receive unjustified criticism, they will always stand by me. Once, when asked by a journalist how they feel about my run-ins with the censorship board, my parents said they were proud of me and stood by my decision. At the end of the day, it is all right if no one understands me as I

know that my family will always be there for me.

Mr Tan: We give him our advice that there are bound to be low points in his life and he just has to go through them. Now that he is successful, I feel happy because he knows his direction in life.

Will you make a movie about your parents?

Royston: From my first short films *Sons* (2000) to feature film *12 Lotus* (2008), aspects of their personalities have always been captured.

For example, the analogy of the fingers pointing towards one's heart in the last scene of *881* when Little Papaya was on her deathbed, is one of my mother's pieces of advice to teach me that I should not trust people so easily. Friends may betray me but family will never do so. Outsiders will never love me as much as my family.

Mr Tan: The flashy grey shirt that lead character Qi Yuwu wore in *881* was what I wore on my wedding day. It was very funny to see my shirt in the movie. Whatever help Royston wants for his films, I will give it if I can. I was an extra in *12 Lotus*.

How similar are you to your father?

Royston: We are a photocopy of each other. When we are set on a certain way to do things, we stick to it. There are no two ways about it. We are also very loyal to friends.

Mr Tan: We both like to eat fatty meats and have the must-win attitude.

If the parent-child relationship were reversed, would you do anything different?

Royston: I would force him to learn my cooking. My father's recipes are an heirloom. This year, I will attempt to master his bamboo shoot soup which he makes every Chinese New Year.

Mr Tan: I am very satisfied with how he loves the family, and have no desire for him to do anything differently.

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ROYSTON (left, with his father) on how his family supports him

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MR TAN, Royston's father