

Director Glen Goei sold his home in London to raise \$2.8 million to fund his second movie project, *The Blue Mansion*



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Actor Adrian Pang gets hot and heavy with co-star Charmaine Ang, who plays his China mistress, in the new Glen Goei movie, *The Blue Mansion*.

But Singaporeans will not get to see the full sequence of the sexy snog on a spiral staircase. It has been snipped so that the movie, which opens here tomorrow, will get an NC16 rating.

You will have to travel overseas to see the full monty as director Goei says the edit will be restored for overseas screenings.

*Mansion* premiered at the Pusan International Film Festival two weeks ago and was screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival last Sunday.

The snip was done, Goei explains, to help distributor Golden Village reach a wider audience than would have been possible with an M18 rating.

*Mansion* tells the tale of a powerful patriarch, pineapple tycoon Wee Bak Chuan (Patrick Teoh), who controls his family with an iron fist.

When he dies suddenly, his eldest son Teck Liang (Lim Kay Siu), a man seething with suppressed emotion, returns home for the funeral. Second son Teck Meng (Pang), chief financial officer of the company, is having an affair with a China woman Hong Mei (Ang) and is unhappy with his late father's decree that Teck Liang will inherit all.

In the meantime, Wee's daughter Pei Shan (Neo Swee Lin) is single and tortured over the choices she has had to make to win the approval of her parents.

Over the few days of the wake, the patriarch's murder must be solved, but not before a series of dark family secrets is revealed.

The *Blue Mansion* in the title refers to the Wees' family mansion and is a symbol of power, opulence and repression.

In coming up with the story about a wealthy family riven by internal tensions, Goei, 46, says he and screenwriter Ken Kwek set out "to break the rules".

"We were so bored with films from Asia and Hollywood. It's so formulaic these days," he says.

The movie has elements of a murder mystery, ghost story, slapstick comedy and comedy of manners.

Kwek, 30, a former Straits Times journalist, says the movie can be read as an allegory of contemporary

'We were so bored with films from Asia and Hollywood. It's so formulaic these days'

Glen Goei (right), who admits he set out to break the rules in making his latest film



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# Goei's gamble

Singapore: "Think of *The Blue Mansion* as Singapore and all its goings-on as part of the life of this country."

Without giving too much away, the movie touches on racial prejudice and homophobia.

With an estimated production budget of \$2.8 million, this is the most expensive and technically ambi-

tious self-funded movie ever made by a Singaporean.

To fund it, Goei sold his two-bedroom flat, located in the posh St John's Wood district of north-west London. It was the same flat he had mortgaged to finance his first film, *Forever Fever* (1998).

That movie's international success enabled him to repay the loan, but he is under no illusions about the box-office prospects for *Mansion*. It is a talky, genre-crossing film, although he is hopeful it will reach an international audience.

"Some people will think what I've done is foolish, because in the film industry, there is an adage that you never put down your own money. I don't know why I did it. I must have caught a flu or a bug," he says with a laugh.

There were other reasons for deciding to self-fund his second movie. The theatre veteran, who started out as an actor before taking on film directing and who is also associate artistic director of the Wild Rice theatre group, says he has been waiting an age for the right script.

That finally came along in 2007, courtesy of Kwek whom he had commissioned to pen the story because he lacked the time and the discipline to write his own screenplay.

Over a three-hour mahjong-paper-and-marker-brainstorming session in 2007, Goei plied Kwek with ideas. And a month later, there was a complete script in his e-mail inbox.

Though it was the screenwriter's first attempt at a full-length script of any kind, Goei fell in love with the work and made only minor tweaks, he says.

The prospect of turning 50 in a few years also added urgency to the project. The director, who made his name in London's West End playing Chinese spy Song Liling in the smash hit *M Butterfly* in 1989, says: "I knew I had no more time. I thought, 'just go all the way'."

Once that initial decision had been made, he was so impatient that he could not wait for the "form-filling and committee approvals" it would take to obtain funding from government agencies such as the Media Development Authority.

Hence the decision to self-fund, which also allowed him the freedom to make his own choices for the movie, such as having a cast of more than 30 actors from Singapore and Malaysia, shooting on film rather than high-definition video and filming on location at an authentic 1880s Penang mansion.

Goei, who is single, says: "I made these artistic choices for the film because I didn't know if I would be making another one."

These choices also included hiring people with track records in prestige film-making. His cinematographer Larry Smith has worked with director Stanley Kubrick. Briton Ian Bailie, who worked on the Oscar-winning period drama *Atonement* (2007), was brought in as production designer.

Australian composer David Hirschfelder created the score. His resume includes the Nicole Kidman-Hugh Jackman epic *Australia* (2008) and the Oscar-winning biopic of pianist David Helfgott, *Shine* (1996). Hirschfelder enlisted the aid of a bassoon player, a euphonium player and 12 other orchestral musicians to perform the music.

Goei found them through artists' directories and

advertisements and was happy that they were willing to work on a relatively low-budget Asian movie. They were drawn by the strength of the script, he says.

The casting was a no-brainer for him - a who's who of Singapore theatre are in the film, including Tan Kheng Hua, Emma Yong, Claire Wong, Karen Tan and Pam Oei.

But he demanded a lot from his cast. He told actors and real-life couple Neo Swee Lin, 45, and Lim Kay Siu, 52, to lose weight.

Neo, who shed 7kg from her usual 55kg in five weeks by using a packaged meal replacement programme, says: "Glen felt it was befitting the part. The camera does put 10 pounds on you."



Bedroom eyes: Actress Tan Kheng Hua plays Veronica, the sexually frustrated wife of Teck Meng (Adrian Pang, both above), who has a China mistress.

Lim, playing her brother Teck Liang, took 5kg off his 73kg frame using the same programme.

The director had a different worry for Pang, 43, a long-time friend and collaborator who had played the lead role in *Forever Fever*.

Pang is a popular actor with MediaCorp TV and Goei was concerned that his handlers at Caldecott would object to him playing the angry, foul-mouthed and philandering Teck Meng.

Pang says, laughing: "He said, 'I don't know if this role is good for your image, your handlers might have an issue with it'. I said, 'All the more reason to do it'."

Goei says he feels no pressure for his long-awaited second feature, even though expectations from fans and the industry might be high.

After all, *Forever Fever*, about an Ah Beng who hopes to win a disco contest, won both a release in the United States, a first for a made-in-Singapore movie, and earned him a job with Miramax Films, which produced such Oscar contenders as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Cold Mountain* (2003). It hired him to develop new projects from 1999 to 2003.

"There was pressure then to come up with movies that were marketable and entertaining, but I constantly came back to stories I knew about my own culture, things which are not necessarily entertaining to a American audience," he says.

He hopes to find a local and international audience for *Mansion*, but he is aware that it lacks mass appeal.

"I didn't do it for the money. I can't live my life that way," he says.

Whatever the financial outcome of the new venture, he will not have regrets. "I'm philosophical about it. I entered this with my eyes open and I'm glad to have gone through it," he says.

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