

# Behind the Scenes of Singapore Dreaming

E-INTERVIEW WITH COLIN GOH AND WOO YEN YEN



**Big Dreams, Tiny Flat:** Directors Woo Yen Yen and Colin Goh, with boom operator Jevin Lim (behind left) and sound recordist Alan Chong (behind right) on location in Toa Payoh Lorong 1.

Welcome home Colin and Yen Yen. And thanks for granting us this interview. Can you tell us how *Singapore Dreaming* was born?

It began when we wrote this article for the Singapore International Foundation's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary book, about how the Singapore Dream for us had somehow morphed into a Singapore Plan, that is, how you needed to go to specific schools, get specific degrees, join specific companies and so on.

We really did not think anyone would read it, but after it got posted on the Internet, we began receiving hundreds of email responses. What was surprising about them was how long and confessional many were, something you do not expect from Singaporeans. We felt like Oprah!

We were very moved by the many stories that were shared with us, and felt that we had a responsibility to share them with others as well. We grappled with how to do this for a couple of years before deciding to use parts of the stories – plus some of our own experiences – to craft the characters in *Singapore Dreaming*.

Did producer Dr Waffles Wu get involved in the creative aspects of the film?

We made it a point as directors to be receptive to feedback and creative suggestions from everyone, whether it was the cast, our director of photography, and even Waffles as our executive producer. However, we would be the ultimate arbiters of which suggestions were appropriate.



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We also limited the feedback period to two phases: before script lockdown, and the review period during editing. Otherwise, things can go seriously haywire.

**How did you get Dr Sydney Tan involved in the musical score for the film?**

Syd was introduced to us by Woffles. This was a really important introduction! Working with Syd was wonderful as he is a brilliant collaborator who really understood what was needed for the story of this family in *Singapore Dreaming*.

Syd's score is simply beautiful. We feel very lucky to have worked with him.

**Social mobility, upgrading, seeking a better life, family tensions and moving on – how is the Singapore Dream any different from the American Dream?**

There is nothing inherently unique about the Singaporean Dream. The American Dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is substantially the same. (And especially in the upper middle class, the American Dream is fast becoming a Plan too: prep school, Ivy League, Wall Street.)

But what to me gives America more hope is that they still celebrate mavericks; they may never find happiness, but their liberty to pursue it is sacred.

Our experience in Singapore was, however, very different. There were always people telling you what and how you should do things, and imposing penalties for deviation. There were 'right' schools, 'right' professions, 'right' strategies.

Of course there are those who would argue that ultimately, the choice is one's own and that there is nothing to prevent one from doing what he or she wants in Singapore. After all, is it not one's fault for caving in to peer pressure? This is perhaps true, but it is really hard to be an individual when there are so few people we have as role models who have charted alternative paths.

**What do you miss most and least about Singapore when you are in New York City?**

We miss our families, friends and the food most. As for what we miss least – I guess it is the small-mindedness and servility that many Singaporeans seem to exhibit. On the other hand, after having experienced living under the current neoconservative climate in the United States, maybe it is not so different after all.

**If you had the power to change something about Singapore, what would it be?**

Do you want the whole list or just the top 40?

**If you had the power to change something about the United States, what would it be?**

The Republicans.

**You both managed to get very strong acting from your cast of *Singapore Dreaming*. Any favourite characters from the film?**

We love them all. Every single member of the Loh family is an amalgam of people we know, or based on true stories. We also owe a lot to the actors for bringing their own nuances to their characters. It was such a pleasure working with them.

**What would you do if you had two million dollars?**

Probably make another film.

**On his way to his father-in-law's place, Lim Yu-Beng's character relieves himself in the lift at the block of flats. It seemed less of a need to answer Nature's call and more of a deliberate act. Was it an act of defiance?**

That is really up to audiences to interpret – let's say he was, *ahem*, pissed off.

**One of the funniest scenes from the film *Singapore Dreaming* was Yu-Beng speaking Mandarin to the China Girl over beer. Is his Mandarin really so cock-up?**

Yes. But then, his character was based on the





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fluency of one of the directors – the one from a mission school *lah*, not the one from Nanyang Girls High!

We deliberately wanted a Singaporean Chinese person to speak bad Mandarin, so it would contrast greatly with a mainlander. We felt this brought out the threat of global competition much more powerfully than if both were to be equally adept at Mandarin.

We thought Yu-Beng did a fabulous job. Many people have told us that that scene was one of the most profound in the entire film.

#### If you were stranded on Pulau Ubin, which DVDs would you bring with you?

Pulau Ubin is hardly a desert island, but I guess we would bring along the following favourite films, in no particular order:

1. Koki Mitani's *Welcome Back, Mr McDonald*;
2. Miranda July's *You, Me and Everyone We Know*;
3. Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*;
4. Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*;
5. Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*;
6. Woody Allen's *Manhattan*;
7. Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather's boxed set* and
8. A copy of *Singapore Dreaming*, so we know what we are missing on the mainland.

#### Have you ever cried in the cinema and during which films?

**Yen:** This is embarrassing, but I cried at *Legends of the Fall* and *La Bamba*. I also cried for two hours on my own in my sofa after watching the DVD of *Dancer in the Dark* by Lars Von Trier.

**Colin:** *This is Spinal Tap*. When the leprechaun and miniature Stonehenge appear, tears of laughter were streaming down my cheeks. Seriously, though, the only films I have wept at are Anthony Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (think *Ghost* done properly) and Hirokazu Kore-eda's devastating *Nobody Knows*.

#### Which Asian films have left a deep impression in both of you?

We really like *After Life* by Hirokazu Kore-eda, *The World* by Jia Zhangke, *July Rhapsody* by Ann Hui, *Judou* and *To Live* by Zhang Yimou, and *Tokyo Story* by Yasujiro Ozu (a major influence on *Singapore Dreaming*).

#### Which film directors have you admired?

There are so many of them! We are deeply humbled at the thought of how much more we still have left to learn in terms of film craft.

However, the directors who keep us going on a day to day basis are those with a real "I'm just going to do whatever the hell I want to, take it or leave it" attitude: Steven Soderbergh and the crazy Japanese director Takashi Miike, who can make six features a year! Oh, and British director Michael Winterbottom because he prioritises the story rather than developing a particular look or style, like most arthouse auteurs tend to do. All his films look different because he adapts the style to serve the story, rather than the other way round.

#### Any plans to make another based-in-Singapore movie?

We would love to, but it really depends on the reception to *Singapore Dreaming*. The reviews have been great, and we have received many, many emails from audience members saying how much they were touched by the film. Many filmmakers have also told us that they are counting on us to "make it" because they need to have some examples to show their investors.

But whether we make another film in Singapore really depends on whether people buy tickets. Sure, we can be as passionate as we want to be, but it is inhuman to expect anyone to carry on surviving on no salary, project after project.

So please, good doctors, spare us 105 minutes of your time to check out our baby. ■

