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Creating conversations

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Creating *Conversations*

Sharon Tan of The Projector speaks about the privilege of amplifying community voices through diverse programming.



The Projector has a knack for doing things differently. They have unorthodox beginnings: in 2014, the independent cinema was brought to life through a crowdfunding campaign which raised \$75,000. More than just offering an alternative filmgoing experience, The Projector is a unique arts and events space, providing an ideal venue for pop-ups, exhibitions, and films that prompt reflection and conversation.

Says Sharon Tan, Co-Founder of The Projector, "When we set out to start this cinema, it wasn't just about the films. It was more about creating a platform that allows different voices to be heard by a greater audience, which is sometimes quite difficult to have in Singapore. So I wouldn't go so far as to say we give a voice to these people, but I believe that if the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) has rated [a film] for public exhibition, then we should help give these films an audience. Sometimes it's hard to be a brave venue, but we made the decision to not be afraid when we started this."



Sharon, what's the story behind *The Projector*?

A lot of people think we started *The Projector* because we're cinephiles — and that's partly true because I like watching films — but the real reason was because we came to see the building and fell in love with the space. We wanted to make this place relevant again so we had to give people a good reason to come back. Since this place was already a cinema, we thought, why not open it as a cinema again?

The filmgoing experience at *The Projector* is billed as an alternative to the big boys.?

The irony of going to the movies in Singapore is that we do it as a social thing and yet we don't really talk to each other because there's no opportunity to do so. It's an individual consumption exercise — you buy popcorn, sit down, and watch the film. You might be responding emotionally during the film but right after you have to exit the theatre through some corridor in the mall. It's a terrible filmgoing experience.

I think the whole point of having a cinema like ours — along with the cafe, bar and foyer — is so people can have conversations before and after. It's not just

about the films. We wanted to create a cultural platform for people to see different things happening — meet different people, talk to different people, have different things presented to them.

How do you foster these conversations?

We've tried to design *The Projector* as an exploratory discovery — it's about coincidentally bumping into things. For example, we try to bring in different people and slip in messages that others might find interesting as opposed to being boring and preachy about issues. We have posters up about different issues. We host exhibitions and events. And when you come out of the theatre and see something interesting, you might not know how to react, but you'll still go take a look. If you're with friends, you can talk about what you've seen.

The audiences that come to our cinema also like post-show question and answer sessions (Q&As). They feel there is value in having someone talk about the movie and they also want to share their thoughts. And we definitely try to nurture the questioning, critical viewers, so we regularly organise these sessions.





And you guys run all these activities with a really small team.

Yes, the core team that does film acquisitions, programming, marketing, admin, logistics, and box office operations is made up of four full-timers including me. In our cinema operations team, I also have three projectionists and two cleaners.

Everyone — including our projectionists and cleaners — is involved in customer service because accountability and feedback are really important to us. A lot of people are surprised that the programming team works at the box office because when you talk to other cinema chains, the ones doing film acquisition are not the ones selling the tickets. But it's so important that the people marketing and doing film acquisition are the ones selling tickets because then there is direct contact with customers and we're able to keep our finger on the pulse of things.

Sometimes customer service can be quite tedious, especially when we're dealing with angry people. But I think the team recognises how important it is — nobody has ever said they don't want to do it anymore — because it keeps us directly accountable to our audience. For example, if we weren't working at the box office, our approach to creating operational policies would be very different, but because we have to think about the potentially angry customers standing right in front of us, our SOPs are all about letting the team pick their battles while not losing the personal touch.

Can you share more about accountability and customer management?

Of course! The thing about being personally accountable to your customers is that you put them in a position to be accommodating and forgiving. I think that's very powerful.

Take our very first screening of *Moonlight*, for example. In our history of film screening, this one sold out the fastest — within 45 minutes — because we had somehow gotten the director, Barry Jenkins, to do a Q&A with us via Skype after the film. It turned out to be a fiasco on the evening because no one could reach him! We even called his agent, who called his mum, but nobody knew where he was.

So we had to manage the audience who had bought tickets — priced a little more expensive too — as they were sitting around wondering how long more it would take. And we somehow managed to turn it into this thing where we were all looking at the screen going, "Yeah, Barry! Come on! Pick up the call!" We tried for half an hour and apologised to everyone at the end of it, but we still felt really bad so we gave out free movie vouchers. The audience knew we had tried our best but there were things we couldn't control and they forgave us for it. Some even emailed to thank us for how we handled the situation.



So how would you sum up your service vision?

It's about being a good human being through the way we treat each other and listening to what someone else has to say. It's not even about tolerance — I don't like that word — but appreciating that everyone is going to be different and have a different opinion.

Our team truly believes in the medium of film and how powerful it can be in a very subtle way. You might not be able to listen to your mum talk about her day in the office for 10 minutes, for example, but when you watch a film, you can dedicate two hours to something unrelated to you. Because at the end of the day, humans love hearing stories and looking for connections. It sounds lofty, but I feel that if we all talked and listened more to each other, the world would be a better place. I hope our space helps support those conversations. 🎬



“...we wanted to create a cultural platform for people to see different things happening.”