

## Session 4: Getting the right screens for your short film

*\*Please note that the following are replies to the questions asked during the NYFA online Conference event.*

*Panelists have answered the questions in the context of the conference from their own opinions, inferences and perspectives. These responses **may not** directly represent any other entities or organisations unless otherwise stated.*

### 1. If a film gets selected for screening and the colour grading is different from what is screened during the festival. Can we readjust the setting or fix the colour to match it?

**Kuo Ming Jung:** It depends. Most film festivals conduct test screenings for films. SGIFF also has test screenings for all films selected for the festival. If there's something wrong with the colour from what the programme team watched from the screening link, the festival will check with the filmmaker to see if there's anything wrong with the screening copy.

Filmmakers often will want to attend the test screening or do a technical check prior to the film screenings. However, it is not always easy to do so because the festival has limited turnaround time between the screenings and the agreement between the festival. Also, the cinema may not allow it.

Most film festivals around the world will try their best to project the film at the best quality possible. But, filmmakers must bear in mind that the festivals are also working with lots of restrictions and limited manpower. Unless there's something grossly wrong, please refrain from finding fault with the festival if something doesn't match your expectation. It is also the filmmaker's responsibility to check the film with the post production facility house to make sure that there's no fault with the disc.

**Juan Foo:** If your film's end point is the cinema screen, it may not be appropriate to rely on a consumer level monitor to do colour. Best is to do a proper colour grade in the appropriate colour space (ask a reliable colourist).

Best to be confident to send a colour grade that you are satisfied with for the selection, and then if selected, arrange a better 'cinema' colour grade. Also take note, whether the impact of your story is the colour or the story itself to prioritise what quality you want to present.

### 2. Must all short/feature film to shoot in 4k format? (Some platforms don't accept a film in 1080)

**Huang Rui Lin:** 4k is not necessary for the Honour Film initiative. In fact, we do not screen in 4k.

**Prashant Somosundram:** The Projector is not equipped for 4K either, so it is not a pre-requisite for us.

**Juan Foo:** Follow the individual festival's submission requirements if you would like to submit to the particular festival.

You could ask if it is a necessity. If based on your submission documents they are curious to your film, they may allow you to apply. Should you be chosen, then perhaps you may need to consider finishing the film in 4K in post.

### **3. What is the competitive edge that you feel independent film festivals or channels like Vidsee have that big budget studios do not have?**

**Huang Rui Lin:** The Honour Film Initiative is designed to help new or emerging filmmakers shine. Many of our filmmakers are making their first or second film. We love finding diamonds in the rough, and we provide input and various resources to help them succeed. You won't get this from big studios for sure.

**Nikki Loke:** Personally, I like the charm of independent film festivals because after talking to some of the founders, they share that spirit of championing the underdogs within the community. And at the heart of it, they want to showcase their region's authentic stories that have been overwhelmed by blockbuster movies.

Platforms like Vidsee for instance, provide an avenue for local storytellers to share their craft to the world, and in the midst of it, this has the potential to also cultivate an appetite for local short films or web series emerging from all over the world.

**Prashant Somosundram:** Similarly, as an independent cinema, The Projector can focus on developing a strong curatorial voice rather than catering to a broad audience base and hence compromising on quality. It also gives us room to experiment with content because there are avenues to engage with and develop an audience that is specific to that film. Larger chain cinemas may not have the capacity or interest to do so.

**Juan Foo:** Studios are end-to-end organisations. And big studios are filmmaking ecosystems.

Festivals are more celebrative of talent and about prestige. I believe the difference is a sense of community and the genuine resources and attention to the film and the filmmaker.

Independent film festivals may also appear more neutral in their thematic perspectives. But there are so many independent film festivals out there. Ball is always back in the filmmakers' court to know what you're getting yourself into.

### **4. Considering a film/short film is technically great, what do you consider as a weak story?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** When a film is empty - emotionally void and only there to show off the technical excellency - and when a story is underdeveloped.

Sometimes, I come across shorts that have just the premise and it stops there. Films that make me feel 'so what' or 'that's it?' is a weak story. When the film doesn't know what it is about or the story is superficial and only serves to show the technical aspects.

**Huang Rui Lin:** When it looks good on the outside but is empty on the inside. A strong story is one that is personal, authentic, resonates with the audience, is satisfying to watch, and, in the context

of the Honour Film Initiative, and has something to say about what honour is or isn't. It contributes to the ongoing conversation about honour and adds to the body of work comprised of all Honour films, past and present.

**Nikki Loke:** This curation process can be really subjective when it comes to how I perceive stories - is it weak or is it not?

I think in my past observations, the weakest stories have been stories that have an unclear message for viewers. Sometimes, we review a submission and we're left wondering what is it trying to show, or what's the point of this perspective? Then, only after reading its film synopsis/description, we understand the plot a lot better. This could mean that the message didn't translate as what the director intended for the film to do so.

**Prashant Somosundram:** We have occasionally seen films which are technically great, but try to address too much in the story without paying attention to character development. This can be frustrating for the audience. Sometimes it's better to keep the stories simple and authentic in order to engage your audience.

**Juan Foo:** A weak story in a film can be something that is underwhelming and does not meet the expectations of genre, production quality, and/or theme. It is unclear what it wants to say. It does not satisfy the viewer. Perhaps a story that is too ambiguous.

## 5. Is premiere status still an important thing for programming and distribution today?

**Kuo Ming Jung:** Instead of answering whether premiere status is important for the film festival, I would like to ask the filmmakers to consider where and how you want your film to be shown, perceived, or seen.

Ask yourself if your film is suitable for cinematic experience or to be viewed online. Think ahead if it's okay for you that people may watch 20 seconds of your film and move on to the next video, or play on their phone at the same time.

If your film is shown on Youtube or other online platforms, how do you persuade the viewers that your film looks different on a big screen (if you find it not an easy task, consider how the film festivals promote your film to the audiences who find out they can watch your film online)?

For better or worse, film festivals are part of the film industry and function in a certain way to champion specific types of films. Film Festivals can help certain films gain more visibility and connect them with audiences who may not know that these films are out there.

Film festivals are also there to preserve the experience of viewing things on a big screen and share that with other people, however precarious that idea is and its reality is under threat.

If your film has been shown elsewhere before being committed to a specific film festival that asks for premiere status, your film may also have less PR coverage because most marketing materials have been used before.

**Nikki Loke:** Interestingly, we see the premiere status gradually evolving for some of the film festivals today.

In the past, it has an association with exclusivity and perhaps a sense of prestige, in being the first to be screened in that territory. Now, some festivals are also screening films that don't require premiere status.

That said, it's still best to check back on the guidelines/criteria when filmmakers are doing their own submissions.

**Juan Foo:** Premiership is a strategic move for many producers and distributors to evaluate sales potential. But there are so many festivals and platforms nowadays that it can get very complicated.

If there is no or limited pressure to use premiership as a tactic for sales and prestige, premiership is just a badge of honour and opportunity to be associated with the said film festival.

It really depends on the positioning of the filmmaker and what they want out of the film and their film careers.

- 6. Were there any instances of films that were unable to be screened due to censorship or being Not Rated by IMDA despite it being authentic, having a story that mattered and could be a talking point? If so what happened afterward? (E.G Tan Pin Pin's "To Singapore with Love" which was not rated)**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** All films selected for 2019 SGIFF received ratings and were shown without cut to the audiences.

**Prashant Somosundram:** All films shown publicly need to be rated by the IMDA. The Projector does not screen films that require cuts or edits by the IMDA as a matter of principle. For films that are not rated, the only way to have them screened in Singapore is to have a closed door private audience.

- 7. For upcoming and new filmmakers, rejections for their films to be shown on festivals or independent channels may be inevitable. In such cases, what would be the advice for that filmmaker to take on from here?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** Try to get feedback on your films and be REALLY open to hearing that feedback (if people are willing to give it to you).

Set a cut off line for submitting this film to film festivals or independent channels. If there's no response after that specific point, move on and accept that this film doesn't work out.

Think about what you really want to do (with filmmaking). What and why the gap is there between what you think you are making and why people don't perceive it this way. Ask yourself honestly, if there's anything you can improve on the next time. Ask yourself what can really mark your talent - is being the director the only way to go? What if you are better as an editor, producer or a

cameraperson? What if you don't yet have a unique story to tell?

Think hard, work hard, open yourself up and move on.

**Huang Rui Lin:** Be open to input. It is easy for filmmakers to get caught up in their own 'spin' or perspective of what the film is or should be. For the Honour Film Initiative, we have a pitch process where this feedback or input takes place. This enables the feedback to be given and taken on board BEFORE the film is made. So the chances of you 'wasting' your time and resources making a film that does not resonate the audience, are minimised. For new or emerging filmmakers, this feedback/input process is critical as they need more guidance before they embark on such an ambitious endeavour. Find out more at [www.honour.sg/film-pitch](http://www.honour.sg/film-pitch)

**Nikki Loke:** My advice is to be selective when listening to your critics, and work on honing your craft by also continuously watching other films and engaging with the larger support community that you have.

There are mentoring figures in our film community that you can consider reaching out to and talking to, and you may be surprised by the important role that they can play in your filmmaker career.

**Prashant Somosundram:** It is important not to be disheartened. Be open to criticism, but balance that with your own authentic voice. At The Projector, we have seen independent filmmakers rent our screening hall, market and screen their films to the public. This has allowed them access to a wider audience beyond their immediate networks and receive useful feedback.

**Juan Foo:** Rejection is part and parcel of being an artist but it is also the role of the artist to find their own audience.

Evaluate your own values within the scope of 'film festivals' and what value they add to your eventual goal as a filmmaker (artist). In some ways, you may realise you are more of a filmmaker 'practitioner' than an artist.

There is nothing wrong with that. Festivals may be milestones for your career but at times they are more symbolic than literally representative of your careers success.

## **8. Is the process of film curation, especially for festivals, based on the theme of the year, the programmer's sensibility or accolades and buzz?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** It's a combination of all the above and more but it's never a lottery.

As a programmer, I cannot 100% predict how the audience will react to a specific film or strand. However, there's always a reason for putting forward a film or a program. I consider it more like a trial and observation, never a lottery (which means you don't care that much what you select, just blindly take a wild guess).

Ultimately a programmer still guides him or herself by their sensibility, taste and belief in film.

**Huang Rui Lin:** For the Honour Film Initiative, the curation for the Honour Film Screening is based on the excellence of production, story-telling and in amplifying the value of honour (what it means, what it looks like, feels like, sounds like). To be chosen for the screening, a film should be able to shed light on what honour is or isn't, and add on to the ongoing conversation and the overall body of work of Honour films, both past and present. See examples of such films at [www.honour.sg/honour-films](http://www.honour.sg/honour-films)

**Juan Foo:** It is never a lottery. That is too easy. It is a combination of what you are suggesting and perhaps also some finer points of positioning, networking, representation.

Film patronage is a highly subjective yet communal activity. Film curating takes it even sharper because taste-making is hierarchical.

### **9. Are most of your audience mostly filmmakers? How do you reach out to a wider audience?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** I'd hope not.

Marketing, partnership with diverse businesses, organisations and institutions, as well as outreach events are the ways to reach out to a wider audience.

**Nikki Loke:** For Viddsee's platform, the audience demographic varies widely. And to reach out to a wider audience, filmmakers need to have an online presence and actively promote your stories out.

Sharing some key insights from our marketing team, viewers see us as a source of short films with good messages. Our viewers consist of Indonesians and Filipinos, who echo the sentiments of being able to watch films with inspirational messages. It also consists of Singaporeans, who are more passive viewers but do express their liking of certain films that moved them. And lastly, viewers from the US, who have the broadest appetites for content.

A number of teaching institutions found the platform to be a useful place for education (content with positive values), and people generally enjoyed the variety of short films. Some religious institutions use short films for their sermons as well.

And since we've built a brand around indie films, promoting lesser-known/budding filmmakers, audiences like the fact that they can find films which are specific to their countries that they can't find anywhere else (#supportlocal).

Additionally, some of our audiences also love LGBT/SOGIE content on Viddsee. We had an LGBT web series, *CONQ*, which was banned in Indonesia, so the filmmaker uploaded on Viddsee and gained recognition for it.

On top of that, we also have people writing to us with their wish list to be able to watch more Korean dramas, or films touching on historical or current event topics which they feel strongly about and have an opinion about it.

**Prashant Somosundram:** The Projector's audience is pretty diverse and definitely extends beyond filmmakers and cinephiles. We have always focused on the entertainment and communal experience of cinema. We've made it fun and the unique experience enables us to attract a wider

audience.

With our diverse programming, we build partnerships with different interest groups and organisations and leverage on them to reach their communities.

**10. Last year, around 10 SG short films were selected under Singapore Panorama. Are there any plans to expand the number of selections? What are the considerations? Also, what do you consider when deciding to put the films under the SG panorama/ SEA competition?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** It all depends on the quality of submissions this year. I look at the story, the director's capability of creating the believable world to tell his/her story, the vision of the filmmaker, the uniqueness of the story.

Being a non-Singaporean I may also look at films in a different way from what's commonly known or perceived by the local film community. I take on board the suggestions and comments made by the program team for me to understand local sentiments but ultimately, the film has to be good enough to speak on its own.

**11. How did you become programmers? Were you filmmakers before? Do you need to be?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** I always liked films and I tried to do everything and anything relating to film.

I worked in distribution, film marketing, film production (assistant to everything), film festivals, PA for an art director, and did postgrad research in film theory.

Before joining SGIFF, I worked for eight years at the Taipei Film Festival. I joined the team doing hospitality and was invited to join the program team. I tried to understand and learn everything about programming and was promoted to program director after three years.

I love being on a film set but I didn't really come from a filmmaking background. You don't need to do that to be a programmer.

**Nikki Loke:** I studied mass comms back in my uni days - that was when I fell in love with documentaries. I remember watching Jason Oppenheimer's *Act Of Killing*, and I was so intrigued by the making of it that I decided to do a documentary for my final year project - it's about mail-order brides in Vietnam and it had been a life-changing experience for my group mates and I.

All along, I've always been curious to figure out how distribution works, what are the avenues out there that will help share our stories further, are there other great Asian stories that we can learn from as a student? Then fast forward to today, at Vidsee, I make friends with the larger film communities, and I work alongside a team of content community managers to empower other storytellers around us.

I think coming from a filmmaking background has helped us establish a bond with other filmmakers who are figuring out the distribution landscape.

**Prashant Somosundram:** The Projector's programming team is made up of an ex Air Force Officer, an chef and a publisher. So yeah, you don't need to be a filmmaker to become a programmer. An interest and appreciation of a wide range of films, from the classics to the contemporary, is important, as is the ability to articulate why an audience should be coming to the cinema to watch it. Perhaps the strength of our team is in our ability to communicate and engage with our audience in very simple terms.

**Juan Foo:** Film programming can many times be regarded as an 'easy' role - implying just watching films - but it is also highly operational.

My experience with curating and programming is minimal and I started with community screenings. I think everyone who is keen in film practice should be encouraged to try various roles. It widens your empathy to the creative craft and enables you to appreciate the ecosystem.

Prominent programmers sometimes become filmmakers too, and vice-versa as they conveniently cross roles, whether that is beneficial to the eventual film is subjective. Everyone has a film programmer instinct, when they watch films widely, talk about them insightfully, recommend and encourage others to do the same. All part of the enjoyment of film.

## **12. What are some of the most common reasons a film would not be selected to be screened on your platforms? Does censorship play a big role in regards to this?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** Censorship doesn't enter my mind when I watch or select films.

Most common reasons for a film not being selected are:

1. I do not know what the film is about
2. The filmmaker thinks that he/she knows what the film is about but it doesn't work
3. I understand what the filmmaker wants to say but it's not strong enough
4. The film is good but when there are limited slots, there are some that better
5. The filmmaker rejected our invitation because there are other opportunities for their film

**Huang Rui Lin:** Not so much censorship, but relevance is a big factor for us. For the Honour Film Initiative, the selection for the Honour Film Screening is based on the excellence of production, story-telling and in amplifying the value of honour (what it means, what it looks like, feels like, sounds like). To be chosen for the screening, a film should be able to shed light on what honour is or isn't, and add on to the ongoing conversation and the overall body of work of Honour films, both past and present. I.e. It must be relevant to the topic / theme of Honour. So if a film is not chosen, it is likely to be weak in either production values, story-telling and the clarity of what honour means. To get a better idea of what qualifies, see past films at [www.honour.sg/honour-films](http://www.honour.sg/honour-films).

**Nikki Loke:** I think the most common reason is that the film didn't meet the curation guidelines where we factor in story, production value, accessibility and shareability.

For a film that deals with mature topics such as violence/sex/drugs, as long as the filmmaker has used those elements to serve the story's purpose, we will review it similarly with the rest.



**Prashant Somosundram:** The Projector is a commercial entity. Key factors we look at in our selection process are:

1. Unique Point of view
2. High Production quality
3. Commercial viability and marketability

All films screened publicly will need to be rated by IMDA and in principle, we do not screen films that need to be edited or cut.

**Juan Foo:** It is highly subjective to the film festival's branding, taste, spotlight, theme etc. This simply means the film did not meet the current guidelines for that season.

I would like to believe that the issue of censorship has no role to play in a film's rejection. I want to put it out there that filmmakers should not immediately attribute their rejection being just about the film's 'censor'-sensitive content.

I believe festivals are discerning, and they consider many things in the form and function of the film at hand - is the topic done in good taste? Is it unique in voice? Is it a fresh or different perspective?

**13. To what extent do you agree with the statement, "Singaporean Directors should premiere their films in a film festival in Singapore because Singaporeans should be the first ones to love our own films."**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** I don't object to people holding this view but I have never thought about this and I don't hold anything against directors who choose not to premiere their films at SGIFF or a film festival in Singapore IF they have better opportunities elsewhere (but the director should make sure that 'better opportunities' is not a misjudgment).

A lot of filmmakers have told me that however many film festivals they've travelled to, the most important (and sometimes challenging) one is bringing the film to his/her local audience because being accepted and understood by that community, or forming a constructive conversation locally, means a lot to the filmmakers.

A filmmaker should always be seeking advice or suggestions on the positioning of their film. Is it suitable for film festivals? Could a major international film festival be interested in your film? Ask these questions and work out a festival strategy. While this filmmaker friend's comment may have certain wisdom, it would not be wise for the filmmaker to reject the invitation from a local film festival only to find that none of the international film festivals will screen his/her film. By then, the local film festival may have much less interest in showing their film.

#### **14. Being in the age of media saturation, how could Singapore filmmakers bring our film forward?**

**Huang Rui Lin:** I would encourage local filmmakers to keep finding stories, and keep telling those stories. I believe that the more audiences consume global content, the more crucial local content becomes. Because if we don't tell our own stories, who will? There are unique stories to be told, there are unique perspectives that we bring.

**Nikki Loke:** I think you're right in saying that the media is saturated with a lot of content today, and especially in today's circumstance.

Everyone is going online to consume content for various reasons and purposes. There is great potential in the world being able to recognise Singaporean filmmakers and the authentic stories we tell.

Case in point, one of our Vidsee Original series directed by Don Aravind - it chronicles the life of an Uncle who's a taxi driver, and his unique accidental passengers. When it was nominated as Official Selection in the International Short Form Competition of Series Mania Festival 2019 in France, several French viewers found the portrayal of the taxi driver particularly refreshing in the series. It was a moment of realisation for them.

So I really think that if we can push forth a global recognition for local storytellers/filmmakers by having these stories made, we could bring our films forward as a collective.

**Juan Foo:** The Singapore audience pool needs to grow. People need to watch more local content and support it.

Sure, some are not as good, but with support and feedback, they will improve and evolve. This influences and validates both patronage of films and media as an art and a business. It helps Singapore filmmakers if we, the Singapore audience, watch the content.

Platforms are open and algorithms control what viewers consume. So the less audience for Singapore content, the less it will be given priorities to be shared. And in that irony, our films won't be given a chance to 'move forward'.

Sometimes the cynical filmmakers will say, 'Singapore gets the film industry it deserves.' We need to change that if we care about it.

#### **15. Usually, Film festivals have a certain "identity" or a type of film they gravitate towards. What do you think SGIFF's identity is?**

**Kuo Ming Jung:** SGIFF's identity is being the annual film event that gathers film lovers to enjoy, engage and broaden their horizons on world cinema. Being the film institution that expands our imagination and makes us think more deeply and be open to diversity.

Being the platform to encourage Asian, Southeast Asian and Singaporean filmmakers, especially the ones who are just starting out and/or working independently but with original and crucial voices.