



# Projectionists

BY SASHA HAN



When a projectionist enters the control room of the cinema, the first thing they do is switch the vents on. This directs the heat from the projectors out of the booth, preventing the premises from getting too humid and protecting the equipment. Even so, the booths are almost too warm each time I enter one to shadow the projectionists of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Film Festival. If the blizzard-like conditions of the cinema encourage a suspension of disbelief in Singapore's relentless heat, the warmth in the projection booth is conditioned for work.

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The projectionists I spoke to – Bernard Yap, Rahim bin Rahmat, and Han Feng Yu – see themselves as a part of the cinema. From where they sit, the booth separating them from the audience is far more permeable than I had initially assumed, perhaps because to do this job well, the projectionist must obscure their work. Even if the rituals of the job have been streamlined by automation and remote cues, it is no less orchestrated than it was a decade ago. The principle remains the same: protect the diegesis of the world onscreen, keep the work of your hand unseen.

Cinema is centred on the act of looking, of re-presentation, of reifying emotion on screen in the hopes that it expands perception. To that effect, I wanted not only to speak to projectionists but to also see what they notice at work. Many of the pictures included were taken and captioned by them.

DATE: 24 Nov 2022, Opening Night of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Film Festival  
LOCATION: Projector X: Picturehouse  
SCREENING: Assault, 8.00pm

At a little over an hour before the screening, it is surprising how calm the atmosphere of Projector X: Picturehouse is on the evening of the most important media event of the year. Outside, the gentle roar of the festival was coming back to



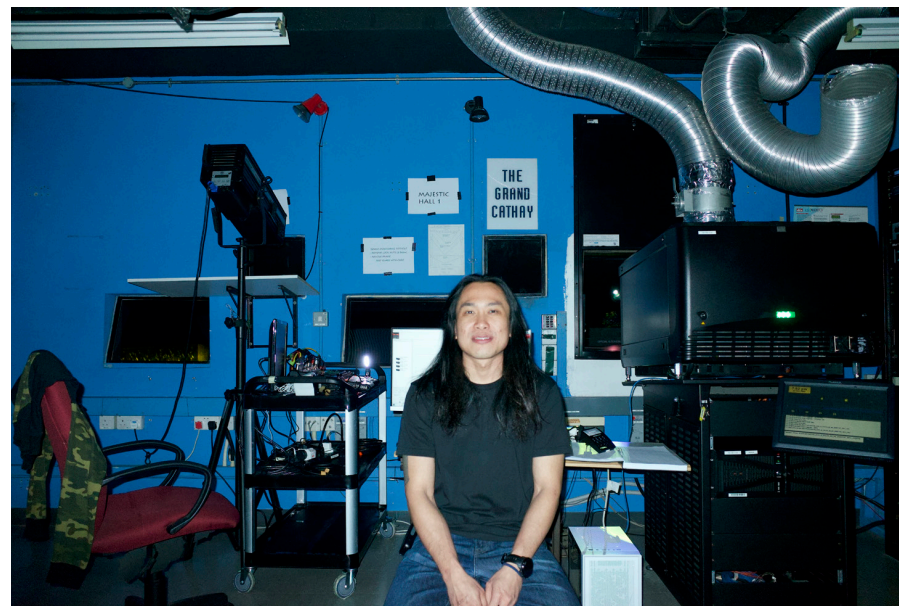


life as the festival returns to pre-pandemic heights to bring audiences, celebrities and industry folks back to the cinemas. Past the camera flashes and the generous red carpet, I meet my friend Deepagcharan Chandran who takes me up to the T-shape projection booth located 7 floors above the cacophony below. Deepag is a projectionist, but he is not working this screening; we are to meet Bernard who will be at the helm tonight.

When Bernard returns from the back-of-house of the theatre bar – which he also manages – he walks me to the control station for the 590-seat Majestic Theatre where the opening film, Adilkhan Yerzhanov's *Assault* (2022), will premiere in Southeast Asia. At this point, there isn't much left to set up: the projector is already warmed up, the last film test was completed earlier in the day, the AV system is rigged up, and the playlist is primed to play when doors open. The only thing left to do is wait for the signal to begin the screening.



Down the corridor of joy. This space gives life to the projectors and sound system. It acts as the nervous system for the cinema, hence it is a space of happiness for me. (Photo and caption by Bernard)



Bernard at the Projection Booth of Majestic Theatre, previously The Grand Cathay.

Bernard's decade-long career began at Universal Studios Singapore where he maintained attractions that relied heavily on screens and audio systems, regularly switching out the lamps and lenses for the *Transformers*, *Madagascar* and *Shrek* rides. He has been with The Projector since 2017 where he was stationed as the projectionist at Golden Mile Tower. When he is working, he senses something special about large, dedicated arenas for communal experiences. "It's absorbing [for the audience]. We're backstage, we do everything nicely for other people. People come in, sit down, have the time of their lives for 3 hours. Escapism. [From up here,] you can sense the vibe of people resonating with the film." When our conversation inevitably turns to the threatening dominance of streaming platforms, Bernard seemed unconcerned and answers, "I feel like people will still come to the cinema for the cinema experience."

The cinema comes into its own past 8pm, at which point Bernard tunes into the speeches on the intercom and adjusts knobs, focused on ensuring the audio is as crisp as possible. At one point, he surfaces from the soundboard to quip that





Through the pothole. (Photo and caption by Bernard)

festival's master of ceremonies, long-time comedian Hossan Leong, "is really good at this!" Before long, he switches the microphones off and engages the cues. The lights dim and the festival begins.

**DATE:** 27 Nov 2022, Day 4  
**LOCATION:** Oldham Theatre  
**SCREENINGS:** *A Tale of Filipino Violence*, 12.00pm  
*Hanging Gardens*, 9.00pm

Past the half-way mark of Lav Diaz's 7-hour *A Tale of Filipino Violence* (2022), I slip into the right side of the control room in the Oldham Theatre with Rahim, who is taking over from the projectionist in the earlier shift. In place of the potholes that occupy the left side of the booth are three screens. Instead of having to stand and walk to the pothole on the other end, he checks at the live footage of the cinema on his monitor, glancing up from the anime he prefers to watch while waiting for screenings to end. "I look up every 2 to 3 minutes to see if everything is in session, that the subtitles and picture are running." It was also how he made sure everyone wore their masks during the pandemic.



Monitor showing live footage from the cinema. (Photo and caption by Rahim)

Rahim is a long way from the dynamism of film projection in the early part of his near 20-year career. After his National Service, he traded his military dress for usher uniforms at United Artists. He recalls that as he cleaned the hall, he often peeked through the pothole "to see how they thread the film through the roller". Rahim's desire to work as a projectionist brought him to the booths of Studio City, Golden Village, Cathay, Shaw, Eng Wah, Filmgarde and now Oldham Theatre under the employment of the Asian Film Archive. He remembers the transition from film to digital projection that occurred during his tenure at Cathay, coinciding with the release of James Cameron's science-fiction epic *Avatar* (2009). Suddenly, he and his fellow projectionists found their job scope expanded to include the duties of managers and ushers. Away from the manual change of bulbs and belt, and oiling and servicing machines, Rahim had to don a smart uniform again but, "That wasn't me, so I left."

His current job allows him to wear whatever he wants, though he asserts, "I'm no longer a projectionist. My title is a Theatre Service Technician." He is at ease with the loss of film projection now, noting "[It used to be that] lamps would have to be changed every 3 to 4 months. With laser projectors, it only has to be changed in 4 or 5 years. This is the good thing; there are pros and cons." Rahim maintains







that for him, the word 'projectionist' is reserved for those who handle film in their 16mm, 35mm, IMAX 70mm forms. "These are actual projectionists, even if they are obsolete."

When I ask if there anything he want people to know about his job, Rahim replies:

"Without projectionists, there would be no show. People should be aware that someone up here is projecting the movie. When a breakdown occurs, movie patrons tend to scold us, but when everything is smooth, they don't care. It's only when there's a problem that people know someone is fixing it."



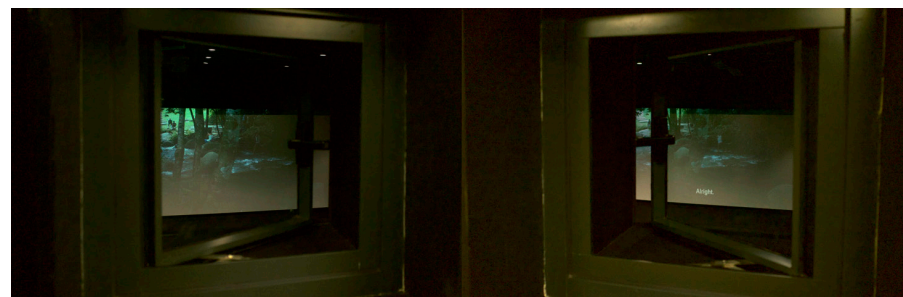
Rahim at his desk.

DATE: 1 Dec 2022, Day 8  
LOCATION: Oldham Theatre  
SCREENINGS: Southeast Asian Short Film Competition - Programme 1, 6.30pm  
Gaga, 9.00pm

When Feng Yu opens the door to the control room and greets me at 2.46pm, he is in the middle of a test screening for another film programme. This time, the file is in MP4



format and plays directly from the iMac control station. He explains that when the film is screened in mp4 format, the present video and audio feedback loop allows for audio projection in the booth so he can sit at the desk to watch the films directly on the monitor. Otherwise, in the industry standard DCP (Digital Cinema Package) format, he opens the windows at what he calls the "eyes" of the projection booth and stands by them to tune into the audio of the films.



The left and right eyes of the projection booth. (Photo and caption by Feng Yu)

He keeps the windows open during his shifts in the time leading up to and during the screening. It is also the area he values most in the projection booth. "I watch every single [film he screens]. It is both my job to watch out for anything in case something happens, and I personally enjoy watching films." I ask if he sees a separation between himself and the audience – he is, after all, at work. But it seems that Feng Yu sees the physical demarcation of the projection booth from the audience seated below as so porous that it borders on decorative, an illusion of division. "As long as your eyes are trained on a film, you become an audience by default," he says. "Getting paid to watch a film is really quite good for me."

We get to talking about the festival's diverse line-up at Oldham Theatre and which ones stood out to him. He liked Laha Mebow's *Gaga* (2022) for its succinct evocation of the "specific Taiwanese 'mono no aware'". Zhang Wenqian's *Long Journey Home* (2022) reminded him of one of his favourite documentaries *Oxhide* (2005), while Woo Ming Jin's *Stone Turtle* (2022) seemed to him a combination of *Groundhog Day* and mysticism, "a Southeast Asian revenge film grounded in its folklores and traditions". He also found Alvin Lee's *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2022), winner of Best Singapore Short, "funny and confident", reminding him of





pioneer theatremaker Kuo Pao Kun's writings while *Bambang* (2022) by Yusron Faudi simple "talkie" set-up with two great actors "impressive in its form".

Resisting attempts to identify stylistic and thematic similarities between the films he mentions, Feng Yu is more interested in the visual grammar of films. "When it comes to communication, I don't think we need similarities to be able to listen or speak to one another. It is because we are different that we communicate." There is a generosity in his approach to watching films derived from his directorial practice spanning the lauded *Last Trip Home* (2014) to assistant directing in *Wet Season* (2019). "Film is a language and watching other directors' works is to listen to what others are [doing] with this language. It's communication between different folks who use the same language, no? Sometimes you listen, sometimes you express."



Feng Yu at the left eye of the projection booth, a position he assumes during screenings.  
On the right is a 35mm film projector.



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