



JOURNEY TO THE EAST

WORDS ROSSARA JAMIL PHOTOS ALBERT TAN AND IAN BAILIE

FOR HOLLYWOOD PRODUCTION DESIGNER AND ART DIRECTOR IAN BAILIE, NOW IS THE TIME TO BE PART OF THE ARTS SCENE AND CREATIVE CULTURE IN SINGAPORE

Ian Bailie greets us at the door to his apartment, refurbished to sophistication, in the Tiong Bahru enclave that has been increasingly popular with creative types in recent years. Awash in muted colours, it is adorned with large artwork and shelves stocked with art, film and photography books. The award-winning Hollywood production designer, art director and now filmmaker has been living there for a few months, having set up base in Singapore. On the kitchen wall are drawings by his children who, with his wife, now live in France since Bailie and the family moved there in 2003. Bailie, who first came to Singapore four years ago, was smitten by our city. He has since set up Garage One here, with the aim to settle things down before bringing his family here permanently.

With his experience – his work on films like *Atonement* and *Pride & Prejudice* has garnered a string of Oscar nominations and even the Best Achievement in Art Direction award – Bailie has plenty to offer a creative industry seeking to propel itself further.

He exudes a sense of ease as he settles onto the ottoman, and begins chatting about the premiere of his short film *November* last year at *Redress: Stop the Traffick*, an art exhibition in support of the anti-human trafficking cause.

With compelling dance choreography, the four-minute film shot in Singapore captures themes of human rights, freedom and anti-trafficking. “We wanted to draw people’s attention to it and I thought the best way was to make a film and put it on the Internet,” he says.

During his time here, Bailie has worked on television commercials for Resorts World Sentosa and Far East Organisation, as well as a new series for BBC World that was shot in Singapore. Moving to the little red dot

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is the next phase for the arts graduate who majored in metalsmithing. But his foray into production design began with model making. Working on Tim Burton’s *Batman* was, as he describes, “the height of my model-making days.” Buildings went as high as 14 feet for the model for Gotham City and “you could fill a hawker centre with it”.

Model making marked the start of a fulfilling career for Bailie, whose previous stints were as a percussionist at Ulster Symphony Orchestra,

Northern Ireland’s only professional symphony orchestra and even an architectural technician. “I had befriended some art directors and they took me under their wing and showed me how it was done. Real old school, you know,” he recalls of his start in model making. “I worked my way up. And, yes, I had my sights on production design because if you have a creative spark, you want to put it out there.”

His work has taken him to locations away from his home country Northern Ireland, including places like Ecuador, Czech Republic, Middle East and now Singapore. “When I came here to work on the musical *Into the Woods*, I felt a real creative buzz here. A real excitement of something going on that wasn’t generally sort of expected in Singapore. I fell even more in love with the country,” he says.

“I want to be part of the arts scene and the creative culture in Singapore.”

He acknowledges that the industry is young, but feels confident that it can soar. The arts, after all, surround us in almost every aspect of life. The tired commuter engrossed in a film on her smartphone on the way back home consumes art. And the teenager picking up the latest K-pop dance moves on YouTube is immersing himself into the world of exploring and creating. Where other professions may



have taken more importance in the past decades, the arts will eventually come to the fore as a society matures. More and more will step out on the path of creating art in its various forms. This is an era that Bailie wishes to be part of.

In 2012, he began conducting masterclasses in production design in some of our tertiary institutions. These include Singapore Polytechnic, Lasalle College of the Arts, Tisch School of the Arts Asia and Ngee Ann Polytechnic. Imparting knowledge that he has amassed over the years to the next generation of creatives is just one of the ways he sees himself contributing to the arts and design scene.

But for film production to grow, a lot of work needs to be done on various levels. “For Singapore to have a film society, there needs to be productions to come here with budgets to work with, but also facilities, and people who will then impart the experience to local Singaporeans so that they can learn the craft,” he says. “That’s how it works everywhere. That’s what happened, for example, to Australia and Thailand.”

He adds that big productions have to make their way here, to make products that sell worldwide and not just in Singapore and Asia. “I think

stories need to be made about Singapore. But get the big market with top technicians to help Singaporeans put it on the screen,” he says. “People who come into the industry need projects and productions from overseas to get experience, and the perpetuation of making movie after movie and a budget that you can get your teeth into.”

“But it’s just a matter of time,” he adds thoughtfully. For now, he’s working on various projects and absorbing life in Singapore. His free time is spent on discovering Asian films and exploring the vanishing scenes of Singapore, from the barbershops in Little India to sampling the local fare in the coffee shops and hawkers centres in the Tiong Bahru estate. After all, in his line of work, art imitates life and Bailie lives by the adage, “The devil is in the details”.

What makes a great production designer then? He says, “You have to be susceptible to everything around you. Not just visually, but the way people behave, move and live. And to understand their past history, as well as the architecture and art of the environment. Just being mindful of what’s coming from and where it’s going will help to tell the story.”

