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Darren Aronofsky in Singapore: You can make anything if you persevere

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Genevieve Sarah Loh

SINGAPORE: In the space of six feature films, Darren Aronofsky has shown that challenging and original work still has a place within mainstream movie-making.

With work like the unflinching *Requiem for a Dream*, the fantastically ambitious The Fountain and the epic Noah in a resume that also includes award favorites *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler*, few working filmmakers have left such a striking cinematic footprint.

Which is why the Oscar-nominated director and his work are a perfect fit for the 27th Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF) â?? a regional event with a focus on celebrating and encouraging independent cinema.

The rapt audience at Aronofskyâ??s sold-out SGIFF Masterclass held last Friday (Nov 25) at the ArtScience Museum turned out to learn from an auteur who, with films like Black Swan and The Wrestler, has successfully managed to bridge the gap between commercial and indie without losing artistry or audiences. They were there to pick the brain of a filmmaker whose debut feature was financed entirely from $100 donations from friends and family, and catered by his mother â??who fed everyone peanut butter and jelly sandwichesâ?•.



Darren Aronofsky singing autographs after his masterclass (Photo: Genevieve Loh)

â??Itâ??s usually that original image or idea that stays with the film forever that is an anchor,â?• he told the audience of local and regional film directors, writers, producers and students. â??Thatâ??s the passion that makes you willing to face the hurdles youâ??re going to run into, because you believe that one essence is worth sharing. Itâ??s a long process of spit-balling, telling the story over and over again, and making it richer and richer.â?•

For the director-writer-producer, screenwriting is similar to sculpture, in that â??you slowly work your way at it.â?•

â??For me itâ??s always been about just doing draft after draft after draft,â?• he shared, adding that he goes through an average of 20 to 30 drafts even before production starts. â??Something like *Black Swan* probably (saw) hundreds of drafts.â?•

This meticulous approach â?? that perhaps borders on the obsessive â?? might just be the secret of Aronofskyâ??s success. And it is perhaps the reason why heâ??s only made six feature films since his audacious debut Pi in 1998.

It might also be the one tip many aspiring independent filmmakers in Singaporeâ??s burgeoning film industry could consider picking up. After all, Aronofsky who studied anthropology and film at Harvard before going to graduate school at the American Film Institute Conservatory, is known for pursuing his passion projects through to fruition.

The 47-year-old told Channel NewsAsia in an interview after the masterclass that he tries to make projects that he believes in.

â??Thatâ??s all I can do,â?• he said. â??Whateverâ?¦I really believe in and seems to make most sense, is the one that I do next.

â??For all my films, I just do them in the same way. I really donâ??t have full control if they become hits or not, but itâ??s just a matter if something connects with people at the time,â?• he continued.



Darren Aronofsky on top of the ArtScience Museum after his masterclass (Photo: Marina Bay Sands)

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

â??Itâ??s always a tricky balance of how to get something made. The Fountain took six years to get made and it changed very much in what it was. But eventually we figured out a way to make it,â?• said Aronofsky. â??So I think if you have persistence, you can make anything.â?•

Aronofskyâ??s sprawling The Fountain was originally a US$70 million vehicle for Brad Pitt who famously pulled out just weeks before shooting commenced. The director only returned to the project two years later, this time with replacement leading man Hugh Jackman and a lower budget. He says of all the films that heâ??s made, The Fountain â??was the film I was most passionate about.â?•

So what advice would he give to aspiring indie filmmakers in Singapore struggling to find the balance between critical and commercial viability while navigating a notoriously difficult industry?

â??Certain filmmakers can make those bigger films. And if thatâ??s their aesthetic, thatâ??s their aesthetic. I donâ??t know why would you do it, itâ??s such a hard job,â?• he said with a grin.

â??But Iâ??m sure there are stories here in Singapore that need to be toldâ?¦ (by) someone who is passionate. And only they can tell it,â?• he continued. â??You just have to figure out a way to tell it. If you have to do it on your iPhone or a little camera, there is nothing wrong with that. Those type of cameras work in todayâ??s world. There are a lot of ways to get films made. At this point, you just have to have the story that youâ??re passionate about.

He confessed to not being as familiar with Singaporean filmmakers as much as he would like to be.

â??I tried to educate myself before I came here but I didnâ??t have time,â?• he said. â??But Iâ??ve met some good filmmakers and Iâ??m curious to see what theyâ??ve done.â?•

He singled out Singapore filmmaker Ken Kwek, who moderated his masterclass and is known, most recently, for the satirical Unlucky Plaza, which opened the SGIFF in 2014.

And what would Aronofsky, a filmmaker known for constantly taking risks, say to an industry in a country that is arguably risk-averse?

â??Art is all about being honest and truthfulâ?¦ you have to continue to pursue what you want to do. It may not work well in Singapore or it may work well in Cannes. It may put you in jail, but you canâ??t resist it. Your job is to keep telling the truths that you know.â?•

This is part of Channel NewsAsiaâ??s coverage of the 27th SGIFF, which runs from Nov 23 to Dec 4.

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