

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2018

LIM TING LI



Lim Ting Li with Boo Junfeng at the Singapore International Film Festival's red carpet event, Marina Bay Sands, 2016.

Photo courtesy of Singapore International Film Festival

Lim Ting Li (b.1985) is a sound designer. She is the Director of Sound at Mocha Chai Laboratories, Singapore's first and only Dolby Atmos dubbing theatre facility.

Ting Li's foray into sound began in 2004 with sound design for short films starting with 'Un Retrato de Familia' directed by Boo Junfeng and the very first omnibus of Singapore shorts, 'Lucky 7' (2007). Her work has garnered her multiple accolades such as Best Soundtrack for 'Newton' (2009), directed by Ho Tzu Nyen, at the first Singapore Short Film Awards in 2010. Significantly, she won the Verna Fields Award in Sound Editing at the Motion Pictures Sound Editors' Golden Reel Awards in Los Angeles, United States of America, dubbed the Oscars of Sound, for 'Robomax' (2013), directed by Moayad Fahmi.

Ting Li's journey through the sonic territory of films has seen her taking on roles as Foley artist, re-recording mixer and supervising sound editor. Her extensive filmography comprises local as well as international commercial and arthouse feature films. Standouts include Boo Junfeng's 'Sandcastle' (2010), the first Singapore film in competition at the International Critics' Week Cannes Film Festival in 2010 and 'Apprentice' (2015), presented at the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2016. Other works include Kirsten Tan's 'Pop Aye' (2016), which was awarded the Special Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival in 2017, Tan Pin Pin's 'In Time To Come' (2017) and the highly anticipated and ambitious Russian cinematic project, 'Dau' (2011), directed by Ilya Khrzhanovsky.

A graduate of the Masters in Sound Design for Film and Television from the National Film & Television School, United Kingdom, Ting Li strives to bring the art of sound design to the fore and shine a light on craftsmanship and the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Her design of sonic architectures for film narratives is based on her conviction that sound, far from just being something in the background, adds a pivotal dimension to filmic storytelling.

She is a regular invited speaker at industry programmes, including Broadcast Asia and the Singapore International Film Festival, and has brought students through the craft of sound design in her masterclasses and workshops for institutions like the National University of Singapore, Singapore Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, School of the Arts Singapore and Objectifs Centre for Photography & Film.

A strong advocate for the betterment of the film industry, Ting Li is also a founding member and elected Secretary of the Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH LIM TING LI

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences?

My early inroads into the arts were paved by my well-intentioned parents who sent me for piano lessons and art classes. I coloured a basket of fruits in shades of grey and purple and for some reason, drew a rainstorm over it. Then I quit piano before the Grade One examinations because I simply didn't enjoy it.

It was only when I had the freedom to choose to enter the world of art on my own terms and indulge in its many forms on my own that I started to enjoy it; and I truly found my palette of expression through film and in particular, sound design in films when I went to polytechnic. My influences became a formulation of what I encountered everyday – the films I watched, the music I listened to, and natural sounds in our landscape like the morning calls of the koel bird in the estate, bare footsteps on cold floors, even the incessant construction that goes on in our concrete city.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when working on sound design for films?

Sound is unfortunately still just an afterthought in the creative process of many directors and producers. I often have to convince them that it shouldn't be. Sound isn't just a technical aspect of filmmaking but gives information on the psychological space beyond the frame and can be incredibly evocative. But because some see it as secondary, sound workers often face financial and scheduling constraints, preventing them from making this a viable career. We're still working to counter this mindset about sound design and convince people to spend time and money on it because it's worth it. Think about it, a horror film is nothing without sound!

Another great challenge is to be able to 'forget' what you know about a film and what you have done as part of its production team, so that you are encountering the film like an audience seeing it for the very first time, despite the reality being that you've watched it multiple times because you were working on it. Sometimes we get so familiar with the material that we can anticipate the next sound or picture edit. We are so closely involved with every detail that we can no longer approach it as a film, the way an audience would. Thankfully, I have a bad memory!



Receiving the Verna Fields Award in Sound Editing at the Motion Picture Sound Editors (MPSE) Golden Reel Awards, Los Angeles, United States of America, 2014.

Photo courtesy of Motion Picture Sound Editors

“Sound isn't just a technical aspect of filmmaking but gives information on the psychological space beyond the frame and can be incredibly evocative.”

What motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

My love for sound design and the making of films pushes me on. I don't think it is possible for me to carry on without this love. Also, it's the only thing I know how to do. I've been doing this since I was 18, so the familiarity of this world also helps. If someone were to automate the process of sound design, my world would crash.

What is your personal philosophy in life, and how does it translate into your works?

There are no disclaimers in the end credits.

Once your name is in the end credits, people only know that you did the work. They don't know the circumstances you did it under, the hardship, the budget and the requisite tears sometimes. They will only wonder, is it a good or a bad piece of work? Because of the absence of postscripts, you've got to give your best with every work you do. You cannot find any excuses for yourself if something doesn't work. You just gotta Make. It. Work.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

For me, this is definitely sitting in the cinema with the audience – watching the film with them, hearing their reactions to it, being carried along on their emotional journey through the film. That makes it all really, really worthwhile. Films have an ability to change lives. They provide a multiplicity of perspectives and a chance to live another's life even as you're just sitting there in a chair in the dark of the theatre. They can give respite, refuge, representation. The vicariousness that film offers is one big adventure.

And of course seeing my name up there in the credits alongside everyone else's who has worked super hard on the film. It's sweet to witness our collaboration quite literally in the credits.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

Don't go into it unless you really, truly, absolutely love sound design for films.

At the risk of sounding like some jaded nag, it's not an easy path to tread, especially when we're now all living in a world where visuals take precedence, at least in this moment. But if you can let the love of it carry you through, my advice would be to keep working on different sorts of films – long, short, commercial, indie, great, insufferable. Just get your hands and ears on anything you can so as to improve your craft.

Whenever you're in doubt, go bold or go home. Because, sometimes less is more, but most times, more is just more.

What are your hopes and vision for Singapore's film scene?

That more local audiences will watch local films and even prefer them over international imports because we do have great art and filmmakers and stories worth telling and listening to. Another hope is for the level of craftsmanship in all film departments to improve. I'm talking about scriptwriters, production designers, editors, composers, down to the production assistants. Only then can we hope to elevate the quality of our work.

I'd also like to say that I have seen too many people drop out of this industry because of the lack of welfare provisions and budget. Even the greatest love of one's craft might not be able to withstand the strain and pressure in these aspects. Sometimes, love just ain't enough. So with an eye on all our futures, I hope to see the day when professionals in this industry are able to retire after a long and productive career in comfort.



Panel discussion on sound design at the 27th Singapore International Film Festival, *SCAPE, 2016.

Photo courtesy of Singapore International Film Festival

LIM TING LI



Mixing Kirsten Tan's 'Pop Aye', Mocha Chai Laboratories, 2017.

Photo courtesy of Mocha Chai Laboratories

How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

As a sound artist, it's a stamp of approval and a big encouragement, not just for me, but for my fellow peers and craftsmen in the industry; it means that the kind of work we do, even if it seems to be just one slice of a film, deserves to be recognised and celebrated. In this way the award also shines a light on the collaborative nature of the cinematic art form. Which is also the beauty of cinema.

As the secretary of the Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals, I hope that our industry will uphold standards of best practices, not just creatively but also in terms of better support and welfare for practitioners, and that it will become an industry that is self-sustaining.

Lastly, though I don't see myself as a particularly good teacher, I would like to continue to share what I know about the craft to future generations of sound designers and filmmakers and in turn, I hope to learn from others what I do not yet know.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Thank you to my parents, who supported me in all the ways they knew how to, even though they probably still don't exactly know what I do for a living;

My extended family, who provided their unyielding support and for always accepting me for who I am;

The National Arts Council for this award;

My filmmaking kakis:

Junfeng, who took a leap of faith in me since day one that has led to all this;

Kirsten, for this nomination; Jasmine, Anthony, Kat and all at the Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals. To me, they're the exemplar of filmmakers who possess an admirable readiness and quiet generosity to shore others up and pave the way for the industry, without making any hoopla about it;

To the mentors, tutors, colleagues and friends I've met along the way who have given me the will to persevere and helped me to stay the course and work well in this industry;

To all the directors and producers who have entrusted me with their film babies and allowed me to put my take on them;

Yee Wei, who has made an impossible dream come true. To more pain and joy as we continue creating wonderful works and sounds with our downright awesome team of mochis at Mocha Chai Laboratories!

My son, Eduardo, for being such a trooper and independent spirit even in my absence. Also, the baby in my belly and I apologise for the jolts he gets every time I play a loud sound;

Lastly, to Filipe, for always being my bedrock. ■