



ON THE ROAD

Like the majestic elephant ambling across Thailand in *Pop Aye*, her Sundance-winning debut feature, Singaporean filmmaker **KIRSTEN TAN** is enjoying her cinematic journey, writes **ZARA ZHUANG**

SINGAPOREAN FILM DIRECTOR and cinematographer Kirsten Tan wasn't ready to come home in 2006. After a year-long artist-in-residency programme at the Asian Young Filmmakers Forum in South Korea, the Ngee Ann Polytechnic film alum found herself in Thailand, where she ran a t-shirt stall in Chatuchak market and spent two years bunking in friends' homes from Chiangmai to Bangkok. To the 32-year-old, living like a rover was a liberating experience that wore down the rigidity with which she had been raised. "In my early 20s, I was a total free spirit," Tan says. "I had no idea what the future would bring, but I was young and unafraid."

Fast-forward a decade and her "future" is looking a lot brighter. Not only was Tan's debut feature, *Pop*

Aye, selected from about 4,000 international submissions to open the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at January's Sundance Film Festival, the 102-minute film also went on to win the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Screenwriting — making Tan the first Singaporean feted at the independent film festival. *Pop Aye* is slated to premiere on local screens this month and will be distributed in North America by New York-based film company Kino Lorber.

The movie, in Thai, follows a middle-aged architect who walks his childhood playmate — an elephant — from Bangkok to Loei, 500km north of the capital, encountering adventure and lost souls along the way. The plot could be an allegory of Tan's life: After Thailand, she went on to earn a Masters in Film Production from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and has been based in the city since. She has made a name for herself with a string of high-profile ads and award-winning short films, as well as content for brands such as Giorgio Armani and

Heineken. Her absurdist black comedy *Cold Noodles* took home a Reel 13 shorts, while *Dahdi* was named Best Southeast Asian Short Film at the 2014 Singapore International Film Festival.

But Tan's journey into filmmaking wasn't all smooth sailing. Average in math and science but an ace at humanities, Tan describes how her inclination for the arts made her feel, for a long time, like a disappointment. "Looking back at my life, it's really clear to me now that I belong in the arts from a young age," she says. "It's too bad that I can't go back in time to tell myself that — it would have saved me so much anguish."

Tan counts her older brother, Benjamin, as her staunchest ally and first artistic influence, even though he's now what she terms a



FROM LEFT: KIRSTEN TAN; A SCENE FROM HER AWARD-WINNING MOVIE, *POP AYE*

"corporate suit". As a child she would hang up his drawings and admire their lines and colours, and together they devised imaginative diversions — he would play a tune on the organ and she described images and scenarios inspired by the melody. Her conservative Chinese parents, however, feared she would lead "a penniless and irresponsible life" going into the arts.

Things have improved, and Tan concludes that her folks have come round to her choice of career after seeing how committed she is. "They will never be the kind of parents

who exclaim verbally how proud they are," she explains. "But they would send me messages with a thumbs-up icon when they read about news of my films in the papers."

Following *Pop Aye's* Sundance win, Hollywood has come knocking. Tan's upcoming projects include a film in Portugal for a fashion label, as well as a commissioned short film in Singapore. The latter is based on a chapter of the Chinese classic *Water Margin*.

There's no sign of Tan slowing down. Her penchant for bold storytelling with a characteristically idiosyncratic tone will carry her through the years ahead. "I suspect it's in my destiny to live a life on the road," she says, adding that for the past decade she has stayed in

countless hostels, motels, hotels, apartments and homes of friends. She even keeps a suitcase packed with essentials so she's ready to go at a moment's notice.

"A Thai fortune-teller once told me that the gods are confused about where I sleep," she says. "Interestingly, I have never felt totally lost, and the only reason I can think of is that underlying everything, I have cinema to count on — it gives me a purpose to live and a reason to fully experience, understand and appreciate the different facets of life." ■