

DOCUMENTING THE MOMENT

Bringing together a community of likeminded filmmakers – new and old – non-profit documentary association MyDocs aims grow the documentary filmmaking industry. Business Today speaks to Lina Teoh, Executive Director of MyDocs on the matter

BY NUR ATIFI





Lina Teoh

Business Today: Tell us about MyDocs and how it came to be?

Lina Teoh: About five years ago, a bunch of documentary filmmakers got together and a lot of us had experience working with international broadcasters and had the opportunity to travel quite a bit to discover how the international documentary industry works. We were very much trained in producing for an international audience, which is different on how we normally approach production here.

Because we felt like we were very fortunate to be given this opportunity, we had this desire to give back to the community. Documentary filmmaking is such a niche genre; we never have enough people and we had to lean on each other due to the lack of resources.

We wanted to create a platform through MyDocs; we wanted to bridge the gap between the local and international film industry. The intention was to create training programmes through film screenings and opportunities for more local filmmakers to have more opportunities like we did.

BT: What exactly does MyDocs do?

Teoh: We wanted to focus on events on a monthly basis - be it a workshop, a masterclass or film screening - as long as we have some kind of event. We were also very fortunate because of our long-standing relationship with FINAS. They were really encouraging and supportive. They're in a place where they want to take the industry places, but they don't have the resources either.

From the first few screenings that we had, there were about 15 to 20 people coming and that was great for us. Now, we have like 150 people coming, and it is always people that I don't know, which is a great success story. We always wanted to reach out to independent filmmakers and those that we don't know.

MyDocs aims to be a resource centre for those who are interested in going into this industry - that's what we're here for. We do a lot of training for first time film makers that focuses on two sides: for beginners or first-time filmmaker's training, and for the professionals.

For beginners, we focus on the basic things like which software to use or how to operate cameras. For pros, it's more focused on in-depth documentary topics.

BT: MyDocs, in collaboration with FINAS, is hosting the Crossing Borders International Pitching Forum this month. Can you tell us how does this fit into the association's mandate?

Teoh: There's two main areas that My Docs focuses on, which is training and networking. Crossing Borders International Pitching Forum is an initiative between us and FINAS with European Documentary Network to help local filmmakers learn how to pitch documentary ideas at an international level. Every year, Crossing Borders is held in a different Asian country. This is the third time it's held in Malaysia, the first being in 2011.

Participants go through six months of training, which includes three workshops. The first one was in July, which was a five-day workshop. We had international trainers from all over the world. Through this training, they get two opportunities to pitch to large international panels, potential buyers and decision makers, which might lead to co-production funding for their projects.

The final workshop in December will focus more on financing and what to do when you get co-production partners and where to go from there. For the pitching day, we're having over 15 people on the panel from all over the world. Even though you have European filmmakers coming in, the content of the film has to be Asian-based.

From the European side, it's difficult to understand the Asian market so it's important to have co-producers from different parts of the world. Networking and building relationships is an integral part of being a successful documentary film maker.

For me, it's great because I get to see from both sides of it. I've been through the training and I understand things from that perspective. Now as an organiser, it's a bit easier for me to understand what is needed and what is involved. When I went through it, it really transformed me as a filmmaker and what I've learned through that experience elevated my understanding of the international market.

BT: With your experience in the industry, how did you end up being the Executive Director for MyDocs full-time instead of being on the field?

Teoh: We had only been active for the last two to three years - we weren't very good at running the association. At the time, all of us were running our own projects and it was more volunteer-based. Everyone was out filming, so no one was really around to run the association. We collectively decided to hire someone to manage the association. The industry is very niche so if you want to hire someone, it has to be one of us, someone with insight of how everything works. I ended up being that person.

BT: What are your aspirations for MyDocs and the industry?

Teoh: For me, moving forward, I think we'd like to create more of a feature length documentary creative filmmaking industry, which is a genre that we have not really explored yet as Malaysian filmmakers. We are very experienced in commercials and TV while also having a lot of experience with international broadcasters. But in terms of creative documentary, we don't have a strong market from Malaysia yet. For me, I would like to see more creativity in the documentary industry and more freedom of expression within ourselves. **BT**