

KEEPING IT REEL WITH LINA TEOH

August Man sat down with the executive director of MyDocs

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PHOTOS BY LINA TEOH & LEIPZIG NETWORKING DAY

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE aspects that she loved about being a beauty queen and an actor, it is documentary filmmaking that seems to be the perfect fit for Lina Teoh.

"I just loved it!" said Teoh. During her work on *Mega Structures: Smart Tunnel*, she had to journey hours into the earth with the workers in order to film. During her work on *A Leader's Legacy: Tun Abdul Razak*, she had to deliver the documentary within three months as opposed to a standard one-year window. However, despite all the obstacles and intense hard work involved, she did not mind it at all. As unlike being a celebrity or a beauty queen, never had she felt more like herself.

During an interview with *August Man*, Teoh was asked about her involvement in MyDocs (The Malaysian Documentary Association) and *Crossing Borders*, where does the funding primarily come from when making a documentary, and why she was drawn into the documentary filmmaking scene.

How do you find or generate ideas for documentaries? Or is it a different process for every project?

Well I think everybody has their own process, so I can't speak on behalf of everybody. But generally, in terms of documentaries, how it is different from most other forms of film or storytelling, is that it requires a lot of research. Because you're basing your stories on facts. Especially when you're working with an international broadcaster like National Geographic, you are actually legally required to prove the facts that go into your film.

Therefore, nothing can be simply opinion based; it has to be factual. And where you get the information from, it has to be credible.

So, in that respect, I worked in various genres of films, when it comes to documentaries, research is the biggest difference. It's all really the same, in the sense that storytelling is storytelling. Although a documentary is based on factual content, it still needs to be presented in an interesting manner. Nobody is going to want to sit and watch two hours of someone giving you factual points. It all comes down to how good you are at telling a story. And that's how you keep your audience interested.

Where does the funding for your films primarily come from? And is it easier for you to find funding now that you have a successful body of work behind you?

It's quite different now, because previously I was a producer working in the industry. But now as executive director of MyDocs, I represent



Crossing Borders speed pitching that took place during Leipzig Networking Days

the association. Therefore, I represent all of my members. So there are various places where you can find funding, both locally and worldwide. The unique thing about documentaries is because it's such a niche genre, we need to source for funding wherever we can find it. Most likely, that has to come through from different sources from around the world.

It's very unlikely that you're going to sustain your entire documentary career based on funding coming just from your own region. Within the genre of documentaries, there are so many different types of documentary films. It's very difficult to put everything under one umbrella. But the traditional way of getting funding for your films tends to be being able to bring in different partners to your film. In Asia, especially in Malaysia, we've been very lucky. Over the past 10 years, we have had a very strong support system from FINAS. The latter has been really wonderful in terms of funding many of our local documentary films. **Could you talk about your involvement with MyDocs and Crossing Borders in bringing together local and international documentary experts?**

Part of the objectives of MyDocs is to be able to offer the local documentary filmmakers a platform to better their skillsets and to have exposure and opportunities to training. We work a lot to get the filmmakers to be more knowledgeable in the international documentary field. That's really setting a much

higher international standard when it comes to our training. As part of that objective, we offer a lot of training workshops. Crossing Borders was one that we decided to partner with this year. It's not the first time that FINAS is involved, because FINAS is one of the main partners. We are collaborating with it to help facilitate the workshops.

What they are, are three workshops over six months. They are a European and Asian initiative, so the funding is between the EU and Asian partners. So every year they have it in a different Asian country. The first year was back in 2010. I was actually a participant in 2011, which was the first time they partnered with FINAS. So I can do it from an organiser's and a participant's perspective. (Laughs) Even watching the amazing impact over the past six months from an organiser's perspective, it's been really incredible. What they focus on in this training is filmmakers will submit a story idea. And when they get accepted, the first workshop will be a week long. We have trainers from all over the world. It's really intense.

You were crowned Miss Malaysia in 1998, which in itself is a tremendous achievement. I am curious as to how were you drawn into documentary filmmaking?

Do we really have to mention that? (Laughs) Yeah, it's a massive contrast I guess, from one extreme to the other. I've always loved non-fictions. I have never been someone to sit with a novel. I've always been obsessed

with biographies, auto-biographies and people's life stories. So I think I've always had that natural attraction towards that kind of storytelling. Because I was already in the film industry, it really was a natural progression. Probably in contrast to what my life has been like in front of the public eye, I'm actually quite a private person.

Of course, there was a lot of the aspect of my life that I loved, being an actor and being in front of the camera and that side of things. But in terms of the celebrity side, it really wasn't a natural thing for my type of character. So, I think at one point in time, it became so intense for me that I was really looking for something that's a little more away from the glitz and glamour. And documentary filmmaking has really done that for me, as it ticked a lot of the boxes in terms of the type of person that I am.

I'm extremely curious in nature. And documentaries are amazing, because you can be extremely obsessed about one topic and learned everything about that topic. Like when I was doing the *Smart Tunnel* documentary, I learned all about engineering, what it takes to carve through the limestone under the earth's surface. I journeyed for hours under the earth every day to film, with no other females by the way. (Laughs) I just loved it!

I grew up in Australia. I have two brothers and I've always been a tomboy. So, to those who are close to me, it's more natural for me to be doing this, as opposed to being a beauty queen. I guess a lot of people learned to know me through being an actor, or being Miss Malaysia. So, to them, it's the other way around. They feel that was more of the person that they knew, and this is something that's different. But personally, this is a natural fit. I know that my character suits this very, very well. **AM**



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