REEL DEAL

Two homegrown films will open tomorrow, but the rivalry is good news for film-goers

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NE is a horror flick for the masses. The other is a socially conscious drama.

It looks like just another week at the box office, with two releases duking it out for the film-goer’s dollar. But with one exception: Both The Maid and Perth are homegrown offerings.

This is the first time that two local films are debuting in the same week. Golden Village, which is distributing The Maid, does not foresee a tug of war for the crowds.

GV’s managing director Kenneth Tan says, “The genres are quite different.”

The Maid’s writer-director Kelvin Tong says he will be “queueing up for tickets” to Perth.

He says: “It’s cool that this weekend, Singaporeans have two Singaporean films to catch. That can only bode well for the industry here. We’re getting bigger, more diverse and, most importantly, more fun.”

Tong’s movie arrives amid much chag and glamour.

Produced by MediaCorp Raintree Pictures, this $1.5 million ghostly tale in English, Teochew, Mandarin and Tagalog about a maid who sees ghosts is getting a regionwide release.

It opens in Singapore and Malaysia tomorrow and is due to be released in Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philippines later this year.

In Singapore, it is getting the Hollywood treatment with a 3D-print release and a controversial marketing campaign — life-sized decals of the red-clad maid in the toilets of two of GV cineplexes have been spooking visitors in the past weeks.

The movie has chalked up an impressive $404,776 during sneak screenings over the weekend. This is better than the sneak screening gross of Asian horror hits like this year’s Shutter ($178,939) and last year’s Jun-Oh 2 ($199,387).

Raintree’s chief executive Daniel Yun calls The Maid the company’s “first international film”, made with a firm eye on the box-office potential overseas.

Perth’s tale of a middle-aged taxi driver with big dreams has more modest ambitions. It is getting a four-print release from Shaw Organisation.

Writer-director Ong Lay Jinn says that given the film’s content, Singapore is its “major market”.

But he has high hopes for the $400,000 movie, which premiered to a full house at Prince 1 during last year’s Singapore International Film Festival.

He says: “The Singapore Film Commission, when it was judging the script, said that it’s arthouse but his commercial potential...”

GV funded half of the cost of the movie.

Ong is hoping to seal an overseas distribution deal soon.

Perth’s release is part of a three-picture deal he had with Shaw, which also distributed his earlier feature Return To Pontianak (2001). The horror flick, made on a $50,000 budget, was a surprise hit, grossing more than $150,000.

GV’s senior manager Mark Shaw says: “The local industry needs support in order to grow, and we believe that the best way of doing this is to offer our distribution and exhibition support to local films.”

“The local industry is still in its fledgling stages... That being said, we are seeing a record number of local films this year.”

Director Eric Khoo’s Be With Me, which made a splash at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, has been picked up by Warner Bros Singapore for distribution on Sept 8.

And Jack Neo has two films due out — he is producing next month’s prison drama One More Chance and Not Stupid Too for November.

With The Maid cleaning up at the weekend box office, GV’s Mr Tan is upbeat. “It’s been a great week in terms of box office after a relatively quiet July. It augurs well for cinema-going in general and Singapore films in particular.

“More, please!”

Djinn’s movie demons

WITH his hair gelled to a Tintin-style spike, Ong Lay Jinn (above) looks more like a mischievous elf than the author of the brooding Perth.

The writer-director’s film is a exploration of middle-aged malaise. The project was born seven years ago.

The 36-year-old, who prefers to be known as Djinn, says: “A lot of people mentioned Perth and wanting to migrate there. These were not white-collar or high-echelon types. They were taxi drivers and army men, the non-commissioned officer types.”

He was inspired by the Kiwi arthouse film, Once Were Warriors (1994), about a violent wife-beater.

“I wanted to get to the root of the whole issue — why these guys are so pent-up and aggressive.”

And he wanted to explore the issue of failure because “there’s no room to fail in Singapore”.

But Perth staved in development hell as Ong and his producers tried to scrape together funding. He says: “Our money kept drying and going away. There was the Asian flue crisis, the dot.com bubble burst...”

In the meantime, he made the low-budget horror flick Return To Pontianak, which was a minor box-office hit.

Although the $400,000 Perth received half its funding from the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), the filmmakers had to match the dollar-for-dollar funding scheme. His co-producers — Singaporean producers Foo and Hong Kong lawyer Duncan Jepson — “ended up almost getting nervous breakdowns.”

But the birthing process was surprisingly easy. Ong says: “We had a 21-day shoot and I was worried because there were 26 locations. But we breezed through it.”

The movie stars Lim Kay Tong and Liu Qialun.

After its premiere at the Singapore International Film Festival in April last year, Perth took another year to reach the cinemas. The delay is due to the lack of a release window. Ong shrugs: “It’s just the reality of being a local film-maker with a small budget.”

The eldest of three children, Ong’s father works in the hotel business in Indonesia and his mother is an art auctioneer with Christie’s.

The film maker now divides his time between Singapore and California, where he runs a Vietnamese restaurant with actress wife Hiep Thi Le. They have two children, a three-year-old girl and a four-month-old son.

But the American permanent resident, who relocated there in 1995, says he will never give up his Singaporean passport. The history graduate from the University Of East Anglia adds: “I will always have a heart in making local subject films.”
Give The Maid a chance, you might like her

Once the film critic for Life!, Kelvin Tang is now at the receiving end as a film-maker.

The 32-year-old wrote the short film A Moveable Feast (1995), and co-directed the gongfu motorcycle movie Eating Air (1999).

His latest offering The Maid is an unashamedly commercial stab at the lucrative Asian horror market.

Suggest that some people might think he has sold out to Mammon and the National University of Singapore law-trained Tong chuckles: “I never sold in to begin with.”

Eating Air was an indie film perforce rather than by choice. “I made Eating Air because it was cheaper than going to Columbia Film School in the United States. The movie was my film school.”

The $500,000 movie has not yet broken even despite acclaim on the international festival circuit.

His own personal tastes are far from catholic. “I like mainstream commercial films. One of my heroes is director Robert Zemeckis. I think it’s possible to make mass-appeal films which are not dumb.”

Zemeckis directed Forrest Gump (1994) and Cast Away (2000).

Having done things the budget-conscious way, Tong says there are limitations to that school of filmmaking. Which is why he chose to work with MediaCorp Raintree Pictures.

“Raintree is the only game in town — a studio with deep pockets,” says Tong, who also made The Frontline mini-series for Channel U television.

Raintree’s track record and connections provided muscle.

“This is the first time I’m getting exactly the cast I asked for.”

The movie stars veteran TV actors Chen Shucheng and Hong Huifang, whom Tong says are his childhood heroes. And Filipino star Alessandra De Rossi was an actress he had spotted in the indie movie, Small Voices, years ago.

He is very much aware of the financial aspects of the industry.

“I do consider marketing and promotion as part of the filmmaking process. What I appreciate about the working process with Raintree is that they brought all this upfront.”

The Maid, which cost $1.5 million, underwent a typical Hollywood process — screenings to test audience reception.

Tong dismisses the rumours that the film underwent extensive re-shoots. It was originally scheduled for release last December but was pushed to Chinese New Year and is now being released in time for the Hungry Ghost Festival.

“We had a week of pickup shots as all big films are wont to do. The delay was more because of the exhibition window,” he explains.

Pickup shots are done to fill in missing gaps in previously shot scenes. Exhibition window refers to time periods in the cinemas’ release schedules.

The eldest of three children — his parents are retired from a toy-shop business — the hyper-articulate Tong jokes that the one thing that scares him is box-office financial ruin. But he soberes up for a long serious moment and declares that he is “freaked out by indifference”.

Singaporeans, he muses, are voracious consumers of the pop cultures of other countries.

“I really wish there was a thriving music and book-publishing industry here. I’m being spoilt but I want a thriving cultural scene.”

As a producer of some of that homegrown product, he has a request: “I’m not counting on unflagging blind support from Singaporeans. But we really should pay more attention to our own culture.

“It’s not so much kindness, but give it a shot. You might like it.”