What would you do for someone who is stranded in a foreign land and unable to spend one of the most precious occasions of the year with his loved ones?

That is the question posed by School of Art, Design & Media alumnus Lincoln Chia (Class of 2009) in the short film “Reunion 团圆饭”, part of the #WhyBeTowkayTan campaign led by Singapore-based video agency Sproud.

Also supported by the National Integration Council, the campaign uses candid interviews and storytelling to challenge xenophobic perceptions and share perspectives from both locals and immigrants on coexisting in Singapore.

The film tells the story of Towkay Tan who is frustrated by his Chinese National coffee shop runner’s inability to understand our local vernacular – such as kopi-o ko-song – even after six months in Singapore.

But the Chinese New Year season serves a timely reminder to Tan that his employee Ah Biao is a father, husband and son too – albeit one unable to return home to spend the season with his family. Hence, Tan invites his employee to join his reunion dinner.

Says Lincoln, the campaign’s creative director and film’s director: “These days, you get students from different countries coming here to study, so it’s only natural that they will continue to work in Singapore after they graduate. And if you eat regularly at coffee shops, you’ll notice the runners are no longer locals.”

“Why Be Towkay Tan/Reunion is not about telling Singaporeans to take sides (on the issue of community integration). Rather, I wanted to challenge them to think and ask themselves: Why not?”

As in: why not we come together to make the stay of our foreign guests just that little bit more welcoming?

Armed with an ideal he believed in, Lincoln made his pitch and managed to secure funding from the National Integration Council’s Community Integration Fund, adding: “In the past, they have supported events and activities like futsal in which both locals and foreigners come together, but this is the first time they have backed a short film campaign.”

A reunion within a reunion

While working on the film, Lincoln enjoyed a mini reunion of his own with his Art, Design & Media peers: eight out of nine of the core production team are alumni of the School, with the last member a graduate of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information.

However, executive producer Goh Kun Lei (Class of 2010) says: “We were just trying to source for people who are really good at their craft. It wasn’t anything like ‘Oh, you are from the School of Art, Design & Media, please join us’.”

“It’s quite interesting that it ended up that the main team is mostly from the school. I guess this could be because we are familiar with each other, and there is also a certain bond and trust present that is very important in filmmaking.”

But if sourcing for his film crew came naturally, Lincoln had a more difficult time finding acting talent.
The campaign’s creative director and film’s director ADM alumnus Lincoln Chia (Class of 2009) discusses community integration in the #WhyBeTowkayTan campaign.

Expects executive producer Amanda Tan (Class of 2009): “While there are good actors in Singapore, our talent pool is small so you tend to see the same faces over and over again. Fresh faces are hard to come by, what more finding an actual Chinese immigrant to play the lead role of Ah Biao.”

Luckily, their casting and talent manager Siew Shu Hui knew a contact who had cast a lot of people from different walks of life as extras and for commercials, and chanced upon a gem in the rough in Chinese national Li Wen Qiang.

Enthuses Lincoln: “It’s his first proper acting role – he’d previously only played bit roles as a passer-by or dead person. I was so impressed by him because he spent several nights practising his lines till perfection, he enters every scene prepared.”

“Even though Wen Qiang is not from the Sichuan region, he could deliver his opening line in the heavy Sichuan accent we were looking for.”

Indeed, the novice actor’s efforts paid off with the film catching the attention of online cinema platform Viddsee, which has more than two million monthly users. The #WhyBeTowkayTan campaign has also been featured by popular local websites like Mothership and The Online Citizen, and internationally on China’s CCTV-4. So far, the short film has been screened in two film festivals – Maharashtra International Short Film Festival (Mumbai, India) and FoodCine (Singapore).

Most of all though, director of photography Lim Teck Siang (Class of 2009) hopes that the film manages to get its message across to Singaporeans, saying: “We are immigrants ourselves – we all came from different places initially, this land didn’t belong to us… Also, Singapore is not a country with big resources so you need a very strong talent pool. We have to be inviting for others to want to come here.”

“People must accept that we are all Singaporeans, we can all live together in harmony. But I think it won’t work if we are too aggressive in trying to communicate this idea. As a more passive form of communication, films might just be able to succeed in doing so.”

And buoyed by the success of this School of Art, Design & Media alumnus-led project, Teck Siang has another aim in mind: “Most film crews who come from established schools, such as the LASALLE College of the Arts or Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s School of Film and Media Studies, have a very strong sense of identity. Our School is only about a decade old but we are already starting to feel a bit of this.”

“It would help if the School can organise sessions for us alumni to come back and meet with our juniors and talk to them about our experiences in the film industry, so they can learn from what we did right and what we did wrong.”

Amanda certainly believes in the value of peer learning, sharing: “I remember how we had to critique each other’s stories in our story writing classes at NTU. It was great for learning.”

On that note, she has some words of wisdom for their juniors. “I think a lot of people have the misconception: ‘I have a degree now so I should be all set’.”

“Your degree prepares you for the working world, but you are not going to graduate and go straight to being a famous director making feature films. Patience is important.”

“And, be open to exploring new things – I graduated thinking that I would do this or that but my career has certainly changed over the years.”

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