



SCREEN SIRENS

When it comes to making strides abroad in the world of cinema, there are only two candidates that come to mind: Tan Chui Mui and Actors Studio Drama School student Samantha Tan. MC sits down with them to discuss their achievements and aspirations *By Hajar Yusof*

SAMANTHA TAN

In a society where science and math are regarded as the far superior areas of study, Samantha Tan, an aspiring actress, is setting a new standard that proves there is room for success in the arts. Amongst her many achievements, which include performing in the London Olympics closing ceremony, she is the first Malaysian to be accepted into the Actors Studio Drama School in New York, a feat worthy of a nation's praise.

But the road to success was not an easy path. Upon acceptance into the

school, she had to raise \$150,000 to be eligible for full enrollment, a sum that she was unable to raise within her own means, but thanks to the quick thinking of her fiancé Ari, she devised a social media fundraising campaign.

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donations came rolling in. In the first 24 hours, the site received 2,000 hits and in three weeks, she raised \$105,000, and was able to make it to the Big Apple in time for enrollment.

But there was, of course, a backlash. Some Malaysians were not so quick to offer her words of encouragement. Her fundraising campaign bore the brunt of criticism from cynical Malaysians. Fortunately for Samantha, she wasn't too bugged by the negativity. “The Internet makes it is very easy for anyone to post anything anonymously without taking responsibility, but I don't believe in censoring or deleting even the hateful comments, because I trust the general public are smart enough to read it all and make up their own minds themselves,” she explains.



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TAN CHUI MUI

From her humble beginnings in Kampung Sungair Ular in Kuantan, award-winning director Tan Chui Mui is now a mainstay fixture in the indie film circuit, both locally and abroad. A decade ago, her debut feature *Love Conquers All* nabbed the New Currents award in Pusan and the Tiger award in Rotterdam. Together with pioneering art house filmmakers James Lee and Amir Muhammad, her works shine as the centerpiece of Malaysia’s modern cinema movement.

Growing up in a small fishing village, Mui had no access to the independent film world. Instead, she resorted to trips to the local video rental store to spark her imagination, which today, translates marvelously onto film. When asked if there was a defining film that shaped her early filmmaking ambitions, she makes a surprising confession: “I gathered inspiration from things I read

rather than from watching movies. I actually wanted to be writer more than a film director.”

Although, her full-length features have brought her a considerable amount of recognition, Mui still prefers making short films. “When I make short films, there is no commercial obligation. There is no pressure to show in cinema, so you can see it as a personal exercise or experiment to try new things,” she explains. Like most screenwriters, she has a certain way of working. We learn that when writing a script she often writes the ending first and tries to isolate herself from real world distractions. “Sometimes I go to a chalet on some secluded island like Cherating or Tioman for two weeks

with no contact from the outside world,” she says. “Although I am not always successful, but you have to try out different ways of working.”

For Mui, growing up in a small town had its limitations, but it served as a rich drawing ground for inspiration in the later part of her career. Her first feature length film, *Love Conquers All*, tells the story of a small town girl who travels to Kuala Lumpur in search for brighter horizons only to lose herself in the glare of the city lights, while her second feature length film, *The Year Without Summer*, was shot entirely in her hometown of Pahang. Evidently, as director, she is at her best oscillating between past and present, where her directorial guidance always produces wonderful, compelling narratives about growth and redemption. [mc](#)

