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Here come Tisch grads

Among the 23 graduates are (from left) Amalia Yunus, Jessika Hegewisch-Auerbach, Ashish Ghadiali and Lai Weijie.

By Veronica Koh

A 46-year-old German freelance writer, a 30-year-old Briton and two young Singaporeans who studied business and philosophy.

What unites this mixed group of people is that they are part of the first batch of 23 graduating students from the New York University Tisch School of the Arts Asia.

At the commencement ceremony held at Capella Singapore last Friday, the New York University, which opened Tisch in Singapore in 2007, granted degrees outside New York City for the first time.

For the foreign students, the Tisch school here offered a chance to combine their love of film with an opportunity to study in a new cultural milieu.

Mr Ashish Ghadiali, 30, was a lecturer in creative writing at the Arab American University in Palestine before he decided to pursue film studies. After sourcing for film schools, he chose Singapore because of his interest in Asian cinema works.

The Briton said: 'Singapore didn't have a film tradition that I knew about. While it was a risk coming here, it was a risk that worked out in the end.'

One of the highlights during his three-year course was being able to learn from renowned people in the industry, such as screenwriter and director Todd Solondz and Oscar-winning film-maker Oliver Stone, who is the artistic director of Tisch Asia.

Mr Ghadiali added: 'We are very lucky to have a teaching faculty like ours, with some of them producing their own works in between coming over to teach us. It was an incredible experience having the entire faculty review my thesis film.'

German freelance writer Jessika Hegewisch-Auerbach, 46, arrived in Singapore four years ago with her family after her husband was posted here. She applied to study dramatic writing when she heard about the school.

While her other classmates dealt with writer's block and deadlines, the mother of four faced a different kind of challenge altogether. 'Balancing family life with my schoolwork was the most difficult task I had to deal with. The workload was intense and sometimes you were working for 12 hours straight.'

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She is applying for permanent residency in Singapore and hopes to get her screenplays produced here in the next few years.

'Singapore is a much better place to be than in Europe or the United States because the theatre scene here is smaller and easier to break into.'

For the two Singaporeans, Tisch Asia has opened new doors.

Lai Weijie, 27, studied philosophy at the National University of Singapore, but decided to pursue film-making after 'watching a lot of movies and thinking I could do a better job'.

He has proven his mettle as he served as the director of photography for *Delilah, Before*. The short film, about a young woman and her child, which was shot in Singapore with an all-Singaporean cast, recently won the Virtual Best Short Film award at the Tribeca Film Festival 2010, the New York-based festival co-founded by actor Robert De Niro.

Mr Lai added: 'It was the first time I had to shoot with a young child, so it was a challenge as I had to improvise quickly when she moved right instead of left. I'm proud and happy that the film made it to Tribeca.'

He will be heading to Cambodia next month to work on his thesis film.

Fellow Singaporean Amalia Yunus, 27, who studied business management at Singapore Management University, fondly recalled the excitement of shooting short films for her master of fine arts degree in film.

She said of one memorable shoot: 'The field surrounding our campus is infamous for its black cobras and on one shoot where we were near the school, I saw a snake slithering directly towards the crew and the naked actor who was lying on the ground. Luckily it went another way.'

'I was also hit by a stray bullet shell casing on that shoot but when you're making films you are caught up in the excitement and hardly think about the danger until afterwards.'

President of Tisch School of the Arts Asia Pari Sara Shirazi, 55, said that NYU and the Tisch School have been very pleased by the response to the school.

She said: 'There were so many challenges to deal with when we first came here. To start an old established programme in a new place involved a lot of risk-taking. But the students have exceeded my expectations of them.'

In the past two years, applications to study at NYU Tisch School of the Arts Asia have doubled. In response to the demand, the school is introducing a new programme, International Media Producing, in August. This multi-disciplinary unit combines film-making, animation and dramatic writing. There are also plans to bring in performing arts, such as learning how to write for musicals.

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