

TV entertainment in Singapore

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TV ENTERTAINMENT IN SINGAPORE

TV entertainment programmes in Singapore have been around since 1960s when RTS first started broadcasting in Singapore.

Since then, the TV Entertainment industry has burgeoned. From the 2 channels that were telecast we now have 4 local terrestrial stations as well some 40 channels available on cable.

The 4 local terrestrial stations are Channels 5 & 8 from the TCS network, and Prime 12 and Premiere 12 from the 12 network. Premiere 12 broadcasts acquired programmes. Prime 12 broadcasts foreign language acquired programmes as well as a small proportion of commissioned Malay and Tamil programmes. The 2 TCS channels command the lion's share of the market. Channel 5 broadcasts in English and has a reach of about 60% of the population and Channel 8 which caters to the Mandarin speakers has a reach of some 70%. Together both channels have a reach of 80% of the population.

Both Channel 5 & 8 offer a smorgasbord of TV entertainment ranging from big budget variety specials, to game shows to locally produced dramas and sitcoms. In total, local programmes make up 79% of programming in Primetime weekly for Channel 8 and 53% of Primetime programming for Channel 5.

Channel 8

Local TV entertainment programmes in Channel 8 are mostly produced in-house by two production divisions, Productions 8 and Chinese Drama.

Productions 8 produces mainly variety and gameshows as well as some sitcoms. It provides programmes for the Primetime belt, 7 days a week as well as off-primetime shows like cooking programmes. It has a weekly output of some 25 hours. It also produces Variety Specials like STAR AWARDS, which are amongst the top rating programmes for the year.

The Chinese Drama Unit was set up in 1983 and has grown from strength to strength both in terms of volume and scope and type of production from daily soap staples to sitcoms, to blockbuster serials to telemovies. It now produces 11.5 hours of drama a week, i.e. about 600 hours of TV Drama a year. The bulk of this is done locally but there are also co-productions with other production houses from different countries as well as collaborations with local directors. A very successful example of this was a telemovie entitled GRANDPA MEATBONE TEA with local auteur Koh Pau Kun which won the Best Made for TV Movie at this years Silver Screen Awards against competitors from all round Asia.

Channel 5

The set up for Channel 5 is much the same as Channel 8. There are two production divisions, VizPro and Productions 5 which supply the channel with almost all local programming in English. Channel 5 is now looking at also commissioning works from production companies outside of TCS. A recent collaborator is Zhao Wei Films, which supplied a mini series of 6 stand alone, 1 hour episodes shot on film.

VizPro provides Channel 5 with game shows, talkshows, variety, infotainment and magazine programmes as well as children's programming. Until 1994, this sort of programming was the only local programming available on Channel 5 until the English Drama and sitcoms hit the screen. The first full English Drama series was MASTERS OF THE SEA which was also shown in Indonesia, albeit redubbed in Bahasa Indonesia and the first sitcom was UNDER ONE ROOF which opened to record ratings of 21%, more than double the next top-rated shows in English. This showed that there was a demand for local dramas and sitcoms in English. The task of fulfilling this falls to Productions 5.

STRENGTHS OF THE INDUSTRY

There are two networks broadcasting in Singapore, cable services, as well as spill over terrestrial broadcasts from Malaysia and Indonesia. However in terms of reach and production, TCS is the major player in Singapore. In terms of production, this means that we have the relative luxury in terms of time, money and manpower to continually strive for quality production values. This has paid off in terms of awards won – TCS has won the Top Broadcaster Award in the Asian TV Awards for the last two years since the inauguration of the Awards. It has also done well in other regional and international competitions, like the New York Festivals, which is the largest media festival in the world.

TCS's size also means that producers have the room to experiment. Consequences for mistakes or failures are not that high. People do not lose their jobs for making genuine mistakes, neither do companies go bust. The studio system offers a sheltered environment in which to take risks and try out new things.

Due to this, for a small country with a very tiny audience base and market, we have an extremely wide range of local production. We have talkshows, gameshows, sitcoms, dramas, with all its varied subgenres – soaps, period, superhero, supernatural -- we have magazine shows, variety shows, big budget one off specials featuring international artistes like the recent HELLO! Concert held at the National Stadium. We have a stripped daily interactive programme for teenagers and children – and all these genres are produced in 2 languages, not dubbed from one to another, but totally different programming, catering to the Mandarin and English speaking populations. Until 2 years ago, TCS also produced Malay and Tamil Language programs for the 12 Network.

This desire to service our local population with local productions has also led to uniquely Singapore products. Local programs have forged a unique identity, reflecting the Singapore identity, the use of language the cultural milieu in which we

move. We have successfully incorporated local characters and themes and captured our local landscape on our shows. Only recently, a character from one of our local sitcoms, PHUA CHU KANG was named one of the icons of 1998, along with Leonardo di Caprio, Ronaldo, Michael Owen and the Spice Girls, amongst others.

The use of English in Singapore as the primary language of commerce and communication (other than Mandarin) has put Singapore in the unique position to be the only Asian country to do Asian programmes featuring Asian faces and Asian culture, in English, on a major scale. This means that Singaporean TV is more accessible to Western markets. TCS is now actively planning to distribute its English language programmes to the western markets.

Another strength of the local industry is that television in Singapore is run as a business. Entertainment programmes are not used for propaganda except sometimes to convey community messages, but even those are more the exception than the rule. The production system is basically professional and concerns with entertainment programmes have more to do with commercial aspects, and ratings, than political concerns.

WEAKNESSES OF THE INDUSTRY

TCS's size, which gives room and shelter for experimentation, also leads to lack of competition and complacency and a tendency to stagnation and insularity. There are no easy answers to this problem because the size of the market place and limited resources especially the small talent pool, suggest that it is not economically viable to support another network in Singapore in addition to the existing 2.

Singapore's small size and small talent pool mean there is no real depth and breadth to the existing industry. We lack a large enough pool of actors to sustain the sheer numbers of programmes, leading to actors and actresses being recycled through different series and serials. There is an ongoing search for fresh faces and new talent but this in a way also limits the scope and sophistication of our productions.

This small talent pool translates to the same problems on the other side of the camera. We lack the required numbers of top-notch, experienced directors and crew as well as support services like make-up, wardrobe and production services. The relative newness of the industry also means that most production people like writers and directors, are young and inexperienced. This is especially a problem in the English Language productions.

This problem affects our ability to sustain both high volume and high quality of output. While we have achieved very high production standards in some of our shows, we still are struggling to be consistent in this high quality, across the board.

All this translates to small pay-offs. TV professionals do not have the same kind of salary structures that their counterparts in other professions enjoy, and certainly not the same kind of material rewards that their industry counterparts in other parts of the world receive.

This makes it extremely difficult to generate a critical mass of TV professionals which is needed to develop the industry. This problem is compounded by an unsupportive and sometimes hostile press. This has its roots in several issues – historically, TV and the newspapers have seen each other as rivals for the advertising dollar and therefore it does not serve the papers to encourage TV viewing by giving good reviews. Secondly, Singapore is at an interesting stage culturally where while in terms of local TV, it hungers for local production, it is also fashionable to run it down. (The print media also suffers from the same problems of talent and experience – hence a lot of reviews are poorly informed, lacking in depth and analysis or plain badly written.)

The size of the market also means that the budgets for programmes are necessarily smaller than the budgets of equivalent programmes made overseas. This a major problem for the English Language Channel where local productions are programmed side by side with the best from the West. It is especially problematic when it comes to action or special effects sequences.

The way around these problems of size is to generate a market that is bigger than Singapore proper and to export our programmes. The Chinese Dramas have done this to some degree of success with our programmes showing regionally in Malaysia, Taiwan and China. On a smaller scale, English programmes have traveled to Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. Doing this however, exposes a different set of weaknesses in our industry.

This has a lot to do with our culture. Singapore is a land of immigrants. The immigrant ethic is well known -- hard work, the struggle for survival, fighting to make a living. Turbulent times existed only some 30 years ago. The message that Singapore, being a small country with no resources, has always to struggle to survive, is deeply ingrained. Thus the "Arts", until recently, have taken a back seat in the rigours of nation building. Only recently have bodies like the National Arts Council been set up to look after the cultural aspect of Singapore. However, the bulk of support for the arts has so far been channeled into the performing arts such as theatre, music and dance. There is less support for literature and writers. Perhaps this is because writers are historically perceived as being politically dangerous. Literature is more directly expressive of people's feelings and lives, and far more accessible to the masses than a more abstract art like painting. Whatever the cause, there is no strong literary tradition in Singapore.

However literature and literary activities are the foundation for other media. For example, the script and the ideas behind the script, is the foundation of a good TV show. Without a strong literary tradition, the TV industry in Singapore has to build its own foundations to build the bridge between culture and TV. The industry is unable to draw upon a thick stock of recorded experiences of Singapore culture and ideas because they don't exist – there are few novels on which to base a series or story ideas, in fact, there are few professional writers in Singapore. Most professional writers are journalists or copywriters. Thus it is nearly impossible for TCS to employ scriptwriters per se – rather it employs people who show talent and then trains them on the job. This means that the writing, and consequently the television show, is only of a certain level and maturity.

Thus, our television shows, while boasting good production values, often suffer from simplistic, black or white scenarios. There is a lack of sophistication and subtlety in the themes portrayed and the way they are handled. This makes it difficult for our programmes to travel. They are often decried as unrealistic. TCS programmes, like Singapore, have a reputation for being clean and moralistic. Unfortunately it is hard to translate those values into revenue, or commercial and critical acceptance, regionally and internationally.

It is interesting to note that judging from feedback, the mass local audience however, seem to want those black and white clear cut scenarios. They do not like open endedness or grey areas. There was a howl of protest for example at the ending of one of TCS's blockbuster serials, GOLDEN PILLOW, when the hero went off into the sunset with 2 women. The local mass audience seems to be disturbed by controversial or uncomfortable endings. Censorship guidelines tell us that all criminals must be punished and no good people smoke on TV. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority keeps an eagle eye on the type of language used on TV – no Singlish, no dialects – as well as themes or content deemed as undesirable.

SOURCES OF NEW IDEAS AND CONCEPTS TO POTRAY ASIANESS OF CONTENT.

New ideas come from anywhere and everywhere – books, magazines, internet, music, other TV programmes, life ... we are very open minded about where we get our ideas from. Each and every country however has its own special brand of Asianess that makes it distinct besides the usual ethics of respect and filial piety. China for example can get a lot of material out of its historical and cultural elements, politics, human rights issues, Tibet; Malaysia and Indonesia have a strong distinctive culture, Hong Kong is perhaps the "cultural imperialist" of Asia – the attractiveness of its culture is similar to the American one with its dynamic entertainment industry in film and music, its freewheeling individualism, its melting pot of cultures, and the element of the underground with its triads and HK Mafia.

The unique Singapore experience is in its young and developing culture which is quite reflective of our status as the entrepot centre of Asia, and the world. We have a mixed culture that reflects both Western and Eastern influences. While we adhere to strong Confucianistic principles, we are also adopt a lot of Western practices -- for example in TCS, everyone is supposed to be on the first name basis. This is mix is part and parcel of our everyday lives.

We try to avoid being Asian in a self conscious way that is, we do not focus on projecting Asian TV content per se. We focus on making programmes that touch a chord in Singaporeans, programmes that we think Singaporeans want, we make them not only recognisably Singaporean but portray Singaporeans as human beings and individuals. We strive to use being Asian as a fact of life, not in a tokenistic way but as a setting and a background and a context. Ideas come from Singaporeans themselves – archetypes that are readily identifiable e.g. PHUA CHU KANG, an Ah Beng contractor, an average middle class family that lives in public housing in

UNDER ONE ROOF, or even a family growing up in the tumultuous times of the 60s in GROWING UP. We take universal situations but deal with it from an Asian viewpoint, for example the pressure to get married, bringing up children, the Asian way of saving face in awkward situations. We explore the peculiarities or idiosyncrasies of the Singapore psyche like "Kiasuism", the "5 C's", the obsession with food and eating. We also deal with specific issues and concerns that are facing Singaporeans like the current Asian economic crisis. Hopefully in the future, it would be possible to explore the more sensitive areas of being Singaporean – like politics and religion. Singapore is in a state of flux which lends itself to a lot of interesting issues as it moves from developing nation status to developed nation -- issues like will the new generation of children have the drive to continue the economic miracle, or people beginning their search for the intangibles in life beyond the materialistic.

CHANGES TO ADDRESS CHANGING AUDIENCE PREFERANCES AND VALUES.

Not only is the audience preference and values changing, the audience itself is changing. Viewing patterns are changing along with lifestyle. There is a plethora of entertainment options clamouring for attention amidst shrinking and precious leisure time.

To generate more variety and freshness in the programming, TCS is now beginning to commission work from outside production houses. It is also using talent from all around the region for e.g. the host of CAN, the children's stripped programme is a Korean-Singaporean and the male and female winners of the station's prestigious STAR SEARCH competition came from Taiwan and Malaysia respectively. TCS is also actively involved in co-productions so that there is a continual flow of new perspectives and styles. Yet, along with all this, there is a commitment and focus on local culture and style because this is our unique selling point that will differentiate us from the other international entertainment options.

TCS is also attracting audiences through new mediums like the Internet, which offer value added services that complement the TV programmes. For example, for the recent NATIONAL DAY PARADE, the viewer was actually able to pick his own camera angle of choice to view the show, along with the camera angles that were selected for the programme proper.

The fast maturing and increasingly cosmopolitan audience also demand high quality, tip-top productions that can compare with the best from all over the world. Being local is no longer good enough, we must also present compelling entertainment with standards and level of programme content and production that will attract audiences. Programming schedules are being reworked to create a belt of more mature local entertainment that can cater to a sophisticated audience who have been exposed to all sorts of programmes worldwide and who demand choices and options.

This brings into focus the increasing importance of the TV professionals – creative and organised people who are not only able to produce top quality programmes, but who, using a combination of feedback and gut instinct, are able to keep abreast of trends and anticipate or even create them, dictating values, fashions and styles.

The TV industry in Singapore is at an interesting point. How well it survives will depend on our ability to produce quality productions, as well as on far reaching strategic thinking and forging alliances in order to capitalise on our strengths and overcome our weaknesses. We in Singapore are hopeful and eager to meet the coming challenges of the next few years and beyond, to the next millennium.

26th August 1998

Attn: Reetha Balakrishna/Joe Carlos
Fax: 7927129.

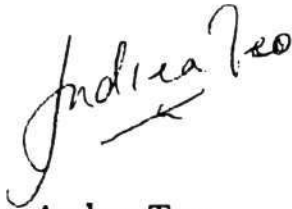
Re : AMIC Conference in Bangkok.

Dear Reetha,

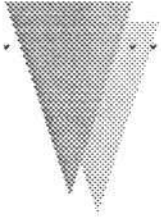
Enclosed is my paper and biodata. As discussed over the phone, I will need video playback and a Power Point projector.

Have a good trip to China.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrea Teo". There is a small arrow pointing to the right below the signature.

Andrea Teo



Day Two
September 3, 1998

Session IV
Balancing Audience Preferences Needs

Zohara Gany Bathusha