

ART REPUBLIK SPEAKS TO  
FILMMAKER KEN KWEK.

BY WAHYUNI HADI

# (Un)lucky Break

Filmmaker Ken Kwek (b. 1979) worked on several Singaporean films before embarking on his first feature film 'Unlucky Plaza'. His writing credits include the films 'Kidnapper', 'It's a Great, Great World' and 'The Blue Mansion' by filmmakers Kelvin Tong and Glen Goei. A former newspaper reporter, Kwek is a graduate from the New York University Tisch School of the Arts Asia with an MFA in Dramatic Writing.

In 2012, Kwek wrote and directed a series of short films presented as a 47-minute omnibus satirical comedy called 'Sex.Violence. FamilyValues'. While the film had a unique history of having its film rating revoked and having had to be reclassified by the Media Development Authority (MDA), the film went on to play at the international film festival circuit and brought home the Audience Award at the Gotham Screen International Film Festival in New York.

Under his company Kaya Toast Pictures, Kwek's first feature film 'Unlucky Plaza' (2014) proved his directing chops when it had its world premiere at the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), one of the most important film festivals in North America. The film combines the talents Philippines' Epy Quizon and Singapore's Adrian Pang, both well-known actors on their homegrounds. The film tells a story of a Filipino restaurant owner Onassis (Quizon) who takes drastic measures after a series of unfortunate events, leading to a kidnapping. The film won actor Quizon the Best Actor award at the International Film Festival of Manhattan.

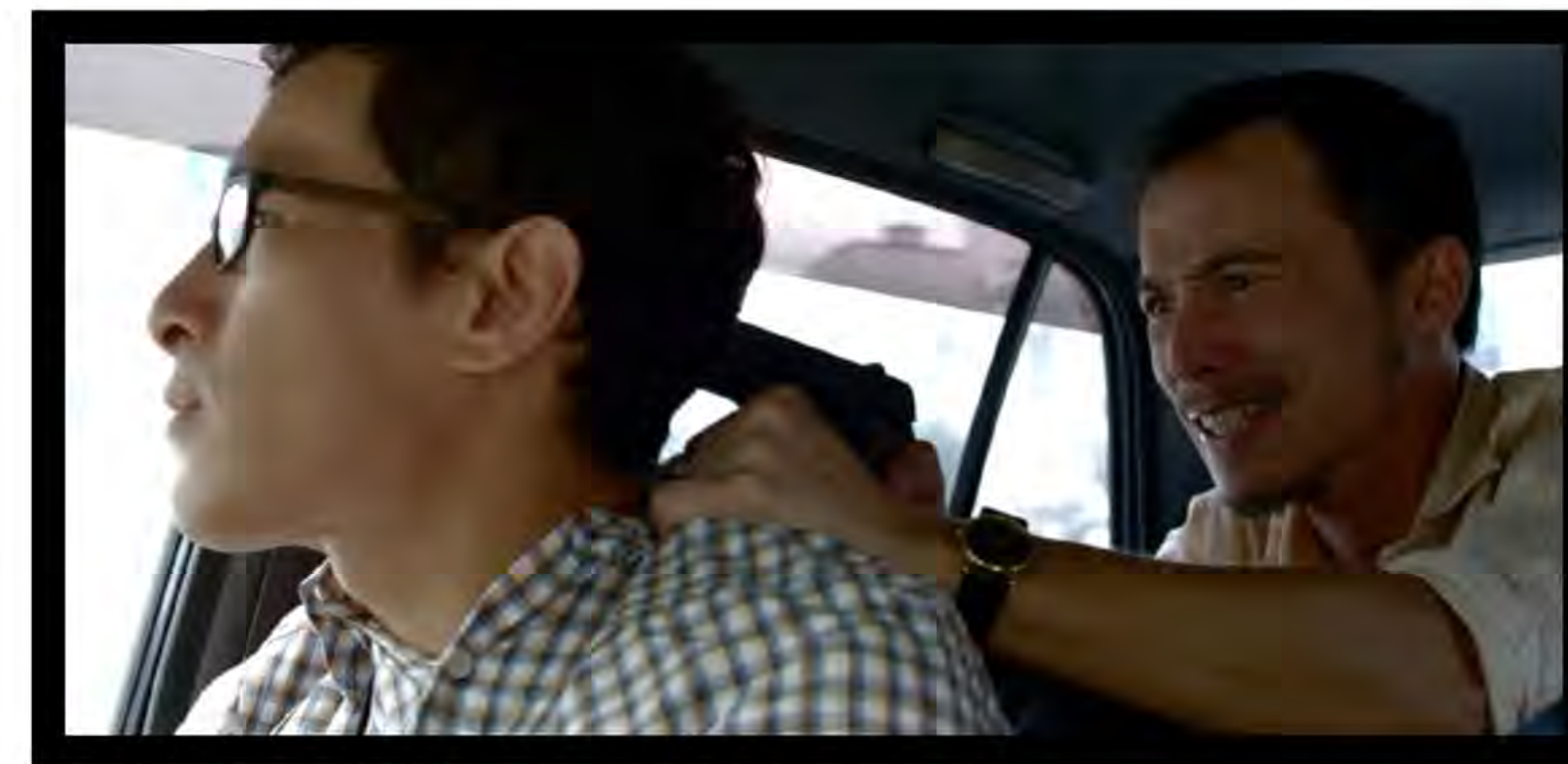
After TIFF, 'Unlucky Plaza' made its homecoming as the opening film of the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF) in November 2014, followed by a theatrical release in early 2015. With a limited release at cineplexes with only nine prints, Kwek was challenged with the likes of blockbuster Hollywood films that had the huge marketing muscles unavailable to independent films. Switching gears, the film found its momentum when independent cinema The Projector ran in one screening hall for 15 weeks, allowing word-of-mouth and reviews to bring in the audience.

In 2016, under U.S distributor Cinemaflix Distribution, 'Unlucky Plaza' was released in two cities, New York and Los Angeles, on 8 and 15 February respectively. Considered a feat for a Singaporean film with so few having had cinema releases or picked up for distribution in the U.S, 'Unlucky Plaza' is in good company with other Singaporean films such as 'Forever Fever' (Glen



This page, right: Film still from *Unlucky Plaza*.

Facing page, from top to bottom: Ken Kwek on set of *Unlucky Plaza*; *Unlucky Plaza* on the festival circuit; A portrait of Ken Kwek.



Goei), '15' (Royston Tan), and 'Ilo Ilo' (Anthony Chen).

Art Republik talks to Kwek about independent film distribution and his U.S release.

**'Unlucky Plaza' had its world premiere at TIFF and then it came home to open the returning SGIFF at the end of 2014. What did it both mean to you and were there any similar or different aspects to them?**

Toronto was an exciting experience. All our screenings were sold out, the audiences were loud and curious, so the Q&A sessions were fun. But for a first time producer-director working out of tiny Singapore, it was also a little overwhelming. I met other filmmakers, sales agents, distributors, programmers, the trade press. Being part of that immense ecosystem was a bit intimidating – but in a good way. I don't feel there's enough competition back home.

SGIFF was a rather serendipitous thing, as you know. The festival had shut down a couple of years back and I had not heard about its planned 're-boot' in 2014. So when the programmers picked us to be the opening film, my team and I were surprised and happy. Given the limited marketing and distribution opportunities imposed by the film's M18 rating – no TV ads, no trailers in theatres, for example – SGIFF played a key role in bringing the film to the public's awareness.

**Then about a year later, you had your U.S release in January 2016. A lot of young filmmakers don't realise how long the period of handling distribution is for an independent filmmaker once a film is made. What was happening in between that?**

I continued with the festival circuit, travelling with the film to Warsaw, Kolkata, Hong Kong and other cities.

In Singapore, we opened with nine prints, a very modest number, sandwiched between two Hollywood blockbusters, Fast & Furious 7 and Avengers. The timings of the screenings were infuriatingly bad. After a week, nine prints got reduced to five. A week later, we were down to one print. Just as we were about to close at the cineplexes, The Projector came to our rescue and picked up a print. Because of them, we went on to run for 15 weeks.

Meanwhile, my partners worked on selling the film (theatrically) to other territories. Before the U.S deal, we showed the film to distributors in Philippines and were fortunate to be signed by Viva Entertainment, one of the biggest distributors there.

**Tell us about your U.S promotional trip. What did you get out of the experience that you will bring forward with you to your next film?**

When I was in New York, I was so chuffed to see my film on the cinema billboard, right next to 'Trumbo' and 'Chi-Raq' – movies by American filmmakers I admire. My next thought was: "If your average moviegoer went into the theatre with no prior knowledge of 'Unlucky Plaza', what were the chances that he/she would

choose my film over the other movies featuring A-list directors and Hollywood stars?" It's a no-brainer. So I had that strange feeling of great jubilation mixed with great resignation. It's a David vs Goliath situation, only David doesn't win.

How will that realisation carry forward into my next film? I don't know. The tough competition local filmmakers face in the global market feels less problematic to me than the limitations of the domestic scene – censorship, the unequalness of the distribution system, the difficulty of obtaining grants for films with edgy themes. The domestic industry must be healthy for its filmmakers for them to truly flourish overseas.

**Having gone through your first film, has your perspective on filmmaking or the Singapore film industry changed?**

I really enjoyed making 'Unlucky Plaza'. I had a great team, a strong crew, a top-notch cast. I have very fond memories of making the film, though pushing it out into the world often felt daunting. I do wish the project had received more support from the Singapore Film Commission as we went into pre-production, but hey, you can't win all the time.

I think both public and private institutions in Singapore are doing well by investing in arts education and providing grants for emerging filmmakers. But these positives won't necessarily yield the best movies without more fundamental changes in the distribution system as well as in audience maturity. The government would be doing local film and local culture a great turn by considering screen quotas, and being less hung up about coddling conservative sensibilities with censorship. Because it ultimately inhibits creativity and risk-taking – key elements in the craft and business of making good movies.

**What are the plans for 'Unlucky Plaza' in 2016?**

We open nation-wide in the Philippines in April. It's a comparatively large and important market for us because our leading man Epy Quizon is a major star in the Philippines. Our distributor Viva offered us a deal that will include promotional air-time on its various TV and radio channels – important marketing elements that weren't available to us in the U.S or in Singapore.

**What's next for Ken Kwek?**

I'm working on another picture. It's as exciting and difficult as ever, getting a project off the ground, making people believe in the impossible. But writing the script, work-shopping it, building something special out of the most challenging material – I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. When I allow myself to stop worrying about the money and focus on the creating, then it's bliss. In those moments, I feel a bit less foolish and little more confident about having chosen a career in the movies. 📽️

For more information, please visit [www.unluckyplazamovie.com](http://www.unluckyplazamovie.com)