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The Migration Film Festival: Capturing An Invisible Population

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A collection of short films by local film makers shed light on the often harrowing situations faced by migrant workers.

Foreign workers have always been a point of contention in Singapore. On one end, there is the issue of overstepping physical boundaries, as was the case with the Serangoon Gardens Dormitory saga, and on the other, the overstepping of economic boundaries, with locals feeling the competition for jobs from foreign talents. The upcoming Migration Film Festival 2010, co-presented by Migrant Voices Films and The Substation Moving Images, hears it from workers themselves through the screening of seven short films and one full-length feature film.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIGRANT VOICES

Made by local filmmakers, the films comprise documentaries examining labor policies and working conditions in Singapore, as well as short films exploring the emotional price the migrants have paid to earn Singaporean dollars and their all-too-familiar concerns, which are ultimately not at all foreign to the typical, middle-class Singaporean. The objectives are three-pronged: to generate interest in the issue of migration and migrant workers, to provide an avenue for local and foreign film makers to showcase their films and to encourage more film makers to produce films on migration and work with migrants.

Lights Out opens with a voiceover asking, "Do you know how it feels like to be homeless?" On any given night, a handful of migrants make their beds on the streets of Little India, for lack of anywhere else to go. "Why are they there? How did their dreams end up on the cold concrete pavement?" the narrator asks. The short documentary captures the day-to-day struggles of three migrant workers who are caught in bureaucratic loopholes. Cheated of their salary, they wait for their case to be resolved, while at the same time are not allowed to work and thus reduced to depending on welfare.

This dehumanizing limbo is underscored in *Special Pass*, where a holder of the Special Pass remarks that they are as helpless as the mannequins they see in Mustafa's shop fronts, leading another to quip wryly, "Even they get a change of clothes every now and then, which we don't." *Special Pass* won in the Best Documentary category at this year's Singapore Short Film Awards. The loneliness and pain of separation from loved ones is amplified in the touching short film *Durai & Saro*, where a construction worker and a domestic helper find platonic solace and companionship in each other.

In *Confluence Of Lands*, an idealistic and impassioned Bangladeshi raises interesting points for discourse. "Our families pawn land and jewelry to send us here. If they give us the money we can start our own business in Bangladesh and develop the country, but they feel they might lose the money, they think it's better to send us out so we can send them money every month. They have not seen the hard labor and suffering we undergo here, sometimes we work from 6 a.m. till midnight. If we give half as much effort back home, Bangladesh will develop; this self-belief is not there in our parents and guardians."

Placing less emphasis on social commentary than the fragility of life is *Promises In December*, where two separate existences converge with one cataclysmic stroke of Mother Nature. *Foreign Dreams*, which plays out as a letter of yearning written by an Indian construction worker to his wife, is as short as it is heart-wrenching. It was awarded the

Silver Crow Bar at the prestigious Singapore Student Creative Awards 2002, and has been screened in film festivals around the world.

Migrant Voices is a charity organization which aims to provide a platform for the exchange of artistic knowledge and tools between migrant workers and Singaporeans, as well as create awareness of different cultures among Singaporeans through quality multi-cultural and multi-ethnic multidisciplinary art productions.

This film festival is part of its new initiative to “develop a centralized repository of films related to migrant workers and migration. The aim of the repository is to centralize the collection of such films so that they are more accessible, as well as to provide the platform to encourage more film-makers to do works on or with migrant workers.”

The Migration Film Festival 2010 will be screening on Saturday, Sep. 11 at The Substation Theatre (45 Armenian Street). 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. (Local Shorts 1); 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. (Bandhobi); 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. (Local Shorts 2 + MV Films Launch). Admission: \$10 per session / \$25 for all three sessions. Log on to www.filmfest.migrantvoices.org for more information or email filmfest@migrantvoices.org.

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