

HOLLYWOOD COMES HOME



F*** chats exclusively with Kamil Haque, the only Asian who has ever taught method acting at the famed Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institution. He tells us why he returned to Singapore to teach and what he hopes actors trained in the Method will do for our local movie industry.

By Raphael Lim

It's that time of the year again. No, we don't mean Christmas, gentle reader, even though that season of plastic reindeers and disturbingly jolly saints has just flown past. We're speaking of the Oscar season: every movie critic's wet dream, the anathema of Michael Bay, with critically-acclaimed dramas crowding movie theatres like kiddies around a Christmas tree.

And while the chances of the Academy Awards being held on our tropical shores are about as probable as twelve inches of snow this weekend, local thespians will be stoked to find that Singapore now boasts its very own Method Acting school (check it out at www.methodactingasia.com).

The Haque Centre of Acting & Creativity (HCAC) – which opened its doors in June 2013 – is the brainchild and lifelong dream of Kamil Haque: actor, acting coach, lifetime working observer at The Actors' Studio, and true-blue son of Singapore.

After a seven-year career in Los Angeles – which included a stint as the only Asian to ever teach at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institution – Kamil has returned home to realise his childhood dream of establishing the region's first-ever Method Acting Academy.

Intrigued, we sat down with Kamil to discuss the impact of a Method Acting school on the local film industry. Would it lead to a boom in the textile industry from an excessive rending of clothes? Would it result in the voracious drinking of milkshakes among our local actors *a la* Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will be Blood*?

Thankfully, Mr. Haque laid our layman misconceptions to rest, and our chat soon turned to other themes: films both local

and international, Hollywood fame, with an added bucketload of facts about what Kamil succinctly calls the 'Method'. Apparently, there's a valuable lesson guys can learn from acting that would make us more attractive to the ladies. Don't believe us? Read on!

What would you say are the benefits of learning how to act for the non-actor?

On a personal level, I've gotten two big benefits [out of acting]. Firstly I've become more authentic as a person. I bulls*** less. I have a big bulls*** detector in my head that tells me 'ok, I'm speaking bulls*** right now, I need to stop.'

The second thing is that I've become a lot more empathetic towards people and the situations around me. It's not about me. In a conversation, I'm the least important person in the equation.

In daily life, if we could begin to really listen to our colleagues, to our loved ones, I mean, how amazing would that be? That empathy of being able to understand not just the content of what someone is saying, but the context that they're coming from. We get so stuck on the content, and that's the least important thing.

Women blame men for doing that all the time, don't they?

[laughs] Right? They say 'You don't listen!' and the guys go 'But I'm listening!' But they're not listening to the emotional core of it. Acting helps with that communication between individuals.

The words 'Method Acting' bring to mind actors ranging from Daniel Day-Lewis to Marlon Brando, but there seem to be a lot of

misconceptions about it, particularly about 'losing one's self' in the character.

Many people assume that Method Acting is a lot of overwrought emotion: I'm gonna chew the scenery, I'm going to cry and pound my chest and rend my clothes and... and tear passion to tatters. It doesn't have to be that!

To me, the method means you don't hurt yourself, you don't hurt other people, and you're not a pain in the ass to work with. There's no reason you should ever be difficult to work with, no matter what you're working on.

Take Daniel Day-Lewis for example. He committed himself for, like, two years as Abraham Lincoln, didn't lose the accent for a year, a year and a half, but he was never once difficult to work with. It should never be an excuse: 'Oh, I'm a Method Actor, don't talk to me.' It's never an excuse, and unfortunately, it has been used as an excuse.

If you had to illustrate the Method with a scene from a movie, which would it be?

There's a scene from *On The Waterfront* with Marlon Brando, where he's walking with Eva Marie Saint in the park.

He's falling for this woman, and he's killed her brother but she doesn't know it yet. He's overwhelmed with all those thoughts in his head. She drops a glove and, in this very tender moment, he picks up the glove, and he's playing with it, showing how much he wants to be with her, but yet overwhelmed with all those other emotions.

Finally, he puts on the glove, and it's a very... you'd think almost nothing of it if you just see that moment. When you know the context of the movie, you think 'Wow, there's so much in that, just putting on that glove.'

You can see how much is bubbling just below the surface in those moments. That to me is master-class acting, when you're not overwhelming the scene. You're not tearing the scenery, but working with subtleties beneath the surface.

Was that what introduced you to Method Acting as a system?

That was the first time I had seen acting in a way that was reflective of life. I was always used to the presentational style of acting, and this was something I had never seen before, and that changed my life. I was twenty-two, and I had not realised what acting could be until I had gone to LA.

It was pointed out to me: look at these moments, this is life.

Do you think that particular revelation rarely ever happens to our local actors?

I agree. We haven't had significant exposure to films of substance, we haven't had exposure to arts of substance. We're constantly fed with the Hollywood blockbuster diet, which definitely

has value... but what more beyond that? We lack the access, the knowledge, the desire to see these films, because unless it has babes or guns or explosions, we think: 'What's in it for me?'

And it's reflective in the work that's put out in the local industry: it's kind of presentational, and very distant from the self.

We also have a local culture that shies away from failure. Does that affect how you teach acting in Singapore?

When I introduced the concept of it being okay to fail to my Singaporean students, they all had that 'Whaa?' look on their face. And then when you let them try it out and they realise, 'It's okay, nothing's going to happen to me.' They ease up on the concept of what failure is.

Do you think that there are any other cultural differences between teaching acting here as opposed to in Los Angeles?

Yes, simply because we lead such sheltered lives in Singapore. We haven't seen enough of the human condition, we haven't seen enough dirt or ambiguity, and that's where creativity and life happens.

Everything here is either black or white, not enough fringe, and so we... I mean, I can only speak from personal experience, but I struggled, being more open to other cultures, people, forms of communication. I think other Singaporeans may face that same difficulty too.

Everything's provided for you here, and you're raised being told what to think and how to think. It's hard to form your own opinion when you're constantly fed on that kind of diet. Unless you step out of that safe bubble – and it is a bubble – you don't realise that there's a whole other world of cultures, languages and viewpoints.

And I'm not talking 'multiculturalism', because there's that institutionalised way of thinking in Singapore. I'm talking about, for example, the film culture, the homosexual culture, or just people who represent different walks of life. That's where creativity is.

Conversely, in what ways do you think Singaporean/Asian culture helps the prospective actor?

I can tell you what it did give me. Going over [to L.A.], I could have very easily fallen off the wagon really quick if not for my Asian roots. I had that much more focus and discipline compared to my peers when I went over there.

Because of the Singaporean upbringing, I also saw things from very logical perspectives, and that certainly helped, being able to think: 'How does this fit into the bigger picture of things? How does this fit into the grand scheme of "What am I trying to do?"'

And I don't think that's something that I would have gotten if I had been raised overseas and tried to do my craft in America. It's a very typically Asian thing: 'Where's the logic in this?', 'What's the point of this?', 'How do I

benefit from this?'. And then, because you have that whole 'ten-year series' kind of work ethic, you put in that much more effort to complete something.

As a layman, doesn't that logical approach detract from method acting?

Not necessarily, I mean, there are two different kinds of actors. There are your physical actors, and there are your intellectual actors. The physical actor – with training – does the physical stuff, and then thinks: 'How do I replicate that?'

The intellectual actor would do the opposite: look at the script, analyse it and think, 'Okay, what do I need to do?' Sometimes, it's a balance of the two: a logical process doesn't necessarily hurt. It was easier to track where I was going, because I had those notes with me.

When do you think acting in Singapore will be seen as a feasible, stable career?

When we begin to see acting as an actual craft, rather than an 'Oh, anyone can do it, it's not that difficult' kind of thing.

Right now we don't have that in our industry, where we have enough respect for the business or knowledge of the business. I mean that in both a top-down and bottom-up sense, all along that line. Our own industry isn't caring enough about us, so why should the outsider looking in care about us? Until we give a s***, no one else is going to give a s***, if you know what I mean?

Doesn't that fall into a catch-22 situation? Local directors who are commercially successful do stuff like slapstick comedies that don't provide or require that kind of rigour from an actor. On the other hand, you have guys like Anthony Chen making heartfelt films of emotional substance, and they only have a few dollars left in their bank account. Would there be a market for your students in this current condition?

I believe so... if only because infusing the industry with actors who know more – and expect better of themselves and the industry – will help.

I wouldn't say that there's no one, but right now there isn't a critical mass of individuals holding themselves up to take ownership for the industry. The people who are actually holding the reins aren't saying 'We need to pump more resources into the training of people both in front of and behind the camera.' The people who're in front of the camera are only now starting to learn that if they get training, they can actually do better work, and be more marketable beyond the shores of Singapore.

I mean, someone like Chin Han, who comes from a stage background, has gone through a lot of rigour and training... or Anthony Chen, he's got training, and it shows in his craft. It's a matter of people warming up to the idea that if you give the craft more seriousness, outsiders will take it seriously.

As an Asian actor from outside Hollywood, what was it like establishing your career in LA?

It was a very, very gradual process. The reality is that, to make it in L.A., talent is one of the least important factors, sad to say. It really is about who you know, who you're dating or who you're related to. Those are the things that will get you to the top of the food chain first, and then comes talent if you want to open those big, big doors.

So for me, it was a really gradual process, getting to know the people in the industry, and then for them to come see my work and then say 'Okay, he's not a bad guy to work with, and he's got *some* talent, let's give him a shot,' and then one shot grows into another and into another... it's a very gradual process, or at least it was for me. I know some people who blew up overnight because they knew someone, they were dating someone or they were related to someone.

Do you think racial profiling is still a predominant trend, or is it getting better for Asian actors?

It's still a predominant trend, and I think it will be for a while to come. Yes, we are seeing more Asians on TV and in film, but it'll still be some time before we see a whole series led by Asians on mainstream TV, or a whole movie led by Asians in Hollywood cinemas.

I think where we'll see that will be on the production side of things first, where you've got your Justin Lin, or your Ang Lee or your Wong Kar Wai. These are names that are respected in the industry, and I think we'll gradually see them bringing their talent pool to Hollywood, or rather, Hollywood actually moving to Asia, where we'll see that infusion happen.

Was that the primary motivating factor of you moving back to teach in Singapore?

No, not really. Even if the industry were to move towards Asia, it's not going to move overnight. It's going to take another ten, fifteen, twenty years before Asia is 'Asiawood' I guess.

I just felt that Singapore was on the cusp of something. I want to be ahead of that wave where things really have started to happen. I think a good ten to fifteen years of getting actors trained – giving people that vocabulary and spreading it around the ASEAN region – would be fantastic, so that when that shift happens, we'll already have actors prepared to tell those stories.

In Singapore, we've got Anthony Chen, who's already fast-tracked it a bit for us. Who knows where that's going to take him – let alone the industry – but at least we've begun to plant flags to let people know that we're here. And I hope that HCAC will be one of those flags that say 'Hey, we're here' too.

As an industry, we don't quite know what our filmic identity is, but we know we want an identity.