FOR TWO SINGAPOREANS, A DREAM TICKET

The rest of the inaugural class of NYU Tisch Asia is from all over the world

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It is a dream come true for two Singaporean film buffs. Ms Amalia Yunus and Mr Lai Wei Jie have secured slots in the inaugural class of graduate film students at the Tisch School of the Arts Asia, the first-ever branch campus of New York University’s (NYU) prestigious Tisch School of the Arts.

The first American art school to set up residence here, it marked its official opening yesterday at its 3,716-sq-m campus in Kay Siang Road, graced by guest-of-honour Minister of State for Trade and Industry Lee Yi Shyan.

Housed in a former television production centre that had been converted at a cost of $12 million, Tisch Asia offers a Master’s of Fine Arts degree in film production, the first such course offered in Singapore.

Since July 2005, LaSalle-SIA’s The Puttnam School of Film has offered a Bachelor of Arts degree in film, although a Master’s degree will be available from next year.

For Ms Amalia, the opening of Tisch Asia is a sign that the arts are being taken seriously in Singapore.

“This school is a step (in the right direction),” said the 25-year-old business graduate from the Singapore Management University (SMU).

“There’s a long way to go for the arts to be fully accepted here, but I am happy to be part of this inaugural batch. It’s nice to know we’re part of the people who are forging the change for the film industry here.”

She and Mr Lai — a 25-year-old National University of Singapore (NUS) graduate — are the only Singaporeans in the three-year Graduate Film Programme, which began last month.

The rest of the school’s inaugural class of 33 students hail from all over the world, with more than half from the United States and the rest from Europe, Asia and Central America.

Founded in 1965, NYU Tisch School of the Arts is one of the leading art schools in North America, with departments in dance, theatre design and lighting, as well as cinema studies.

It counts Hollywood luminaries among its alumni, including film director Lee Ang and actress Angelina Jolie, both Academy Award winners.

Tisch Asia’s entry into Singapore comes after a five-year courtship by the Economic Development Board (EDB). An EDB spokesperson said: “Tisch is a welcome addition to Singapore’s Global Schoolhouse programme, which offers a diverse range of high-quality education choices to students from many parts of the world.”

Emphasising Singapore’s growth as an education and talent hub, the spokesperson said: “Singapore now offers internationally-recognised course offerings ranging from business, wealth management and digital animation to arts and fashion, the culinary arts, luxury brand management and hospitality.”

Given that there are 16 foreign universities with a significant presence here, Dr Pari Shirazi, vice-dean for NYU Tisch School of the Arts and president of Tisch Asia, believes its illustrious history and position as Singapore’s first postgraduate film school will give it an edge.

“In New York, the majority of our students are Americans, but here, the two Singaporean students have the burden of being the hosts and thus help in providing a unique learning experience for the rest of the students,” said Dr Shirazi.

“I truly believe the dynamics will have an impact on the stories they are going to tell (as film-makers).”

Singapore was chosen because of the rich cultural and artistic landscape of this region, as well as its central location within Asia.

Tisch Asia plans to work closely with the arts community as well as collaborate with media companies to provide its students with the necessary experience to further their skills.

According to Dr Shirazi, the school is in discussions with brand names like Discovery Channel and MTV for possible collaborations.

But it wasn’t all business at the official opening. Last night, the school celebrated its grand opening in style at the Mandarin Oriental with a cocktail reception and a disco party.

Among the guests was Hong Kong actor Jackie Chan, who also received the School’s first lifetime achievement award.