Making the cut

Former censor Tan Sock Sun says it’s a good thing that censorship here has kept up with the times

Deepika Shetty

MOVIE-GOERS flocked to Leo Ang’s controversial movie Lust, Caution when it was finally shown here uncut, but as Singapore’s censor for three years in the 1970s, Ms Tan Sock Sun, 68, who was famously tasked with clearing the erotic spy thriller Unholy Matrimony was either clewed.

In the censored version, about nine minutes of the scenes were gone and it didn’t make sense to me. In fact, after watching it, I went to see the uncut version and everything made sense.

Ms Tan, the university’s director of special projects, graduated in political science from the then University of Singapore and joined the administrative service, starting her career with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before being moved to the Ministry of Information.

As Controller, she dealt with books, magazines, movies and nightclubs.

“Even when I was 21 years old and still unprepared for the job,” she said. “When I started, it was a very raw kind of mindset, and as the Controller, I was supposed to be the arbiter of taste.”

In the talk, she touched on some challenges she had faced in recent years such as the release of the movie, The Exorcist, in 1973 with cuts. The film dealt with the demonic possession of a young girl and was generating negative reactions in the United States.

She said: “I was tasked to go and watch it with an impressive audience before deciding whether to clear or to ban it.”

At a lunch-time talk at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on Wednesday about censorship in Singapore in the 1970s and now, she said candidly: “In the 1970s, I would not have passed a movie like Lust, Caution.”

Responding to the group of the presence of about 100 people, which included a mix of students and academics, she explained: “The sex scenes are quite integral to the plot. If you have to cut them out, you cut the main plot.”

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It was interesting because when the actress Linda Blair’s head turned 90 degrees, everyone laughed and I knew that instant it had to be cleared.”

While clearing the movie did not generate any negative publicity, other shockers did: Ms Tan, who did not clear Over the Top, which featured a severed sex scene by Alex Comfort titled The Joy of Sex in 1973.

It was the first serious sex manual and she felt it was a useful book for counsellors.

Holding up the book during the talk, she recalled how the distributors, MPL, were exasperated: “But they did ask me to cut out a typical copy of my authority to ensure my seal hadn’t been defiled.”

Once the book made its way to the stores, complaints came in from parents, including one who asked for a warning, “but I didn’t,” Ms Tan said.

While dealing with movies such as The Exorcist, a big deal in the 1970s, she is glad to see that distributors are sensibly doing moves such as gray cowboy film Blackhawk Mountain and Lust, Caution do not have to be cut in order to be shown.

But the real turning point came after she left her job.

In 1991, the Government deployed in its censorship policy a new twist that cleared censorship on all types of media including film, video tapes, magazines, books and taken shows, on top of that.

Among other changes, there was greater leeway for magazines with adult themes if they have morally practical words. Films that had censored scenes and themes were to be cleared by the Ministry and then either banned or allowed.

Ms Tan said: “It’s evident the times have changed.”

A year before her talk, the movie Lust, Caution was released in November, having the choice to release such a movie meant to her a cry from the days between 1973 and 1974, when Ms Tan was Controller of Unclaimed Publications at the Ministry of Culture, now the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

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