Funding and marketing problems led to low attendance at the fest

Money woes, the late distribution of programme booklets and insufficient publicity plagued the recently ended 23rd edition of the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF), according to the festival organisers.

The final tally for the event, which ran from April 15 to last Saturday, was a low average audience capacity of 40 per cent — a big dip from the 70 per cent attendance of last year. There were just seven sold-out shows this year out of 234 films, while last year had about 50 sold-out screenings out of 193 films.

Before last year, however, the festival had seen dwindling attendances. From a record high of 61,000 in 2003, attendances reportedly declined between 5 and 8 per cent in the following years. The 2004 festival drew an average of 58 per cent attendance, a 5 per cent drop from 2003, and in 2006 the film saw an 8 per cent dip in attendance from the year before, marking the third consecutive year that attendances fell.

Of this year’s 40 per cent attendance, the organisers said in an e-mail: “While this figure does indicate a certain ‘low’, it does not tell the full picture because technically there will always be films which will get a very, very low attendance rate, and therefore this brings the average figure down. As a film festival, we are constantly trying out new things to expose and educate our audience. I am sure given more advanced planning this figure will move up next year.”

In addition, they said that this was a new team, handling their first festival. Poet and academic Kirpal Singh, 61, an associate professor at the Singapore Management University, was also appointed late, in November last year, as the festival’s new board member, replacing film-maker Jasmine Ng.

In July last year, Ms Ng and the two first-time festival directors, Ms Yuni Hadi and Mr Zhang Wenjie, quit, citing differences in vision from festival founder Geoffrey Malone and board member Philip Cheah.

Other reasons given for the festival’s poor showing include the economic crisis, which made getting sponsorship difficult.

“Some of the sponsorship came in very late which delayed the printing and subsequent distribution of the programme booklets,” said Dr Singh.

The booklets made it to the usual distribution centres such as Sistic counters and partner cinemas a few days before the festival opening, rather than the traditional three to four weeks. This in turn caused low awareness of the festival’s offerings among local film buffs.

Film-maker Han Yew Kwang, 34, a festival regular, said the booklets are crucial, not just as a guide but as a publicity tool. “I just felt there was a lack of hype overall,” he said.

Other advertising efforts, such as publicity banners and posters around town, were hindered by the late start in planning the festival and the lack of advertising budget, the organisers said.

Another long-time fan of the festival, Jeremy Sing, 33, a film-maker and blogger on the SIndie independent film website, said his taste runs to more provocative fare. This year’s programme, which organisers have said was more mainstream in order to reach out to a wider audience, was “not as exciting” as he would have liked.

Still, he felt the switch to a safer programme might have worked if there had been enough advertising aimed at the non-traditional festival crowd.

He also noted that in the past there had been tie-ups with the Singapore Tourism Board, resulting in promotion for the festival on STB flyers and other materials.

The festival organisers said they approached the STB, but “it did not feel our programme was a suitable platform to bring in tourists. But it is willing to revisit the proposal again next year”.

They added these issues and several others should be fixed by next year. They hope to get an earlier start next year and improve the website, which suffered from a few glitches this year. They will also convene a proper sponsorship committee, “headed by a well-known charity fund-raiser”, whom they have not decided on.

Festival founder and one of its directors Malone said he is upbeat about next year’s festival.

“International film festivals tend to be generally chaotic and the problems we encounter with the festival are no different from that experienced by other film festivals,” he said.

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