



SEMAINE  
DE LA CRITIQUE  
CANNES 2016

# A YELLOW BIRD

A film by  
K. Rajagopal

World Premiere  
In Competition at 55<sup>th</sup>  
International Critics Week,  
Cannes Film Festival

Singapore / France – 2016 – 112 –  
HD – 5.1 – 1:1.85 –  
Tamil, Mandarin, English, Hokkien





## CREW

### Director

K. Rajagopal

### Producers

Fran Borgia

Claire Lajoumard

Jeremy Chua

### Screenplay

Jeremy Chua

K. Rajagopal

### Cinematography

Michael Zaw

### Editing

Fran Borgia

### Sound

Justin Loh

Roman Dymny

### Production design

James Page

## CAST

### Sivakumar Palakrishnan

Siva

### Huang Lu

Chen Chen

### Seema Biswas

The mother

### Udaya Soundari

Krupta (the social worker)

### Nithiyia Rao

Shanti (the wife)

### Indra Chandran

Suseela





### LOGLINE

Siva, a thirty eight year old convicted smuggler, is released from prison after eight years and begins a journey to locate his ex-wife and daughter who have left him without a trace. His quest leads him to a heinous truth. How far will he go in order to redeem himself from his guilt?

### SYNOPSIS

It is an unwelcomed homecoming for Siva Sudhakar, a 38 year old Singaporean Indian man, who is released from prison after 8 years behind bars for contraband smuggling. He returns to his mother's flat to learn that his old bedroom has been rented out to migrant workers while his ex-wife and daughter have left without a trace. Unable to find forgiveness from his mother, he begins a quest to locate his ex-wife and daughter in order to right the wrongs of his past. An urban vagabond, he finds work banging cymbals in a funeral band while he tracks down people from his life before prison. In his lonely journey, he finds a kindred spirit – Chen Chen, a hostile Chinese woman on a social visit who works illegally to earn money for her debt-ridden family back in China. They connect when one day, Siva defends Chen Chen from a lecherous band member who tries to take advantage of her financial need. Isolated in their harsh realities, they find comfort in the presence of one another. Just as he begins to find solace and hope, he discovers

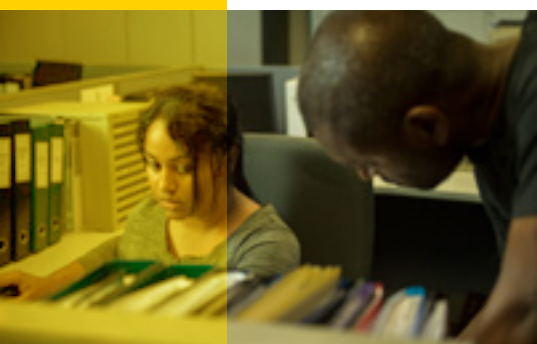
the address of his ex-wife and daughter. There, he is confronted with a heinous truth. How far will he go in order to redeem himself from his guilt?

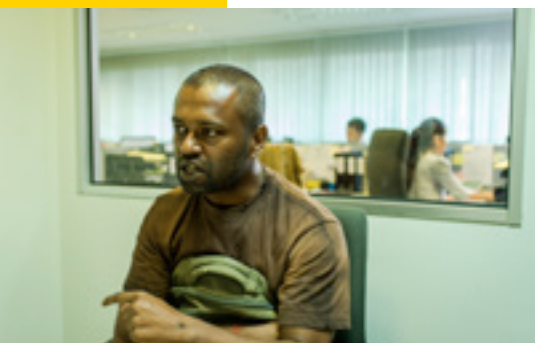
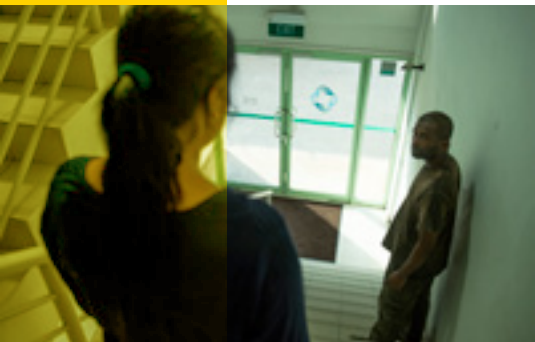
### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Growing up in multi-racial Singapore, one is constantly reminded of one's race – through identity cards, media depictions, education, housing and social quotas. These policies that seek to appropriate an individual's racial status for racial equality and promote tolerance for the other, somehow dissolves a collective identity. It is quite instinctive that a Singaporean primarily identifies himself by race rather than nationality.

My short films have always been exploring this voice of the Indian man in Singapore in a personal style of storytelling. I am drawn to the poetic nature of everyday life as an Indian; the liberties, oppositions, hopes, fears and oppressions.

A Yellow Bird aims to examine the position of the "Indian" in contemporary Singaporean society. We form 7 percent of a non-homogeneous local population that is also made up of Malays, Eurasians and the predominant Chinese. The story stems from my own experiences as an Indian-Singaporean where a sense of belonging and collective consciousness to my birth nation is frequently questioned and tested. One question I often encounter in my own country is "Where





are you from?" The Indian person is at times not recognized as a Singaporean, but as an outsider. It is common for foreigners have the impression that Singapore belongs to the Chinese and do not see it as a multi-racial country.

Since an industrial and economic expansion in the 2000s, there has been a greater influx of foreign Indian labourers – New Indians, who come to work in the construction industry. Just as how the Indians came with the British to construct a new Singapore in the mid-nineteenth century, it seemed that history was repeating itself. A tension between the New Indians and the local population has emerged out of this shift in population boundaries.

Singaporeans avoid social contact with these migrant workers. Their dormitories reduce the land value of residential zones. Their industrial dirt and smells are unwelcome on public transportation. Their culture and behavior are in many ways misunderstood and mocked.

On 8 December 2013, Singapore witnessed its first civil riot in 40 years. Migrant Indian workers rose in anger after an accident killed one of their own on the streets of Little India. Many Singaporeans went to social media to vent their frustration. Using derogative terms against the lower-class migrant population and making xenophobic remarks to the Indian race in general. An immediate parliamentary session raised concerns over public outrage and increasing xenophobia. Instead

of re-evaluating the state in which these migrant workers are living in, the government and media attributed the violence to abuse of alcohol. To solve the problem, an alcoholic ban after 10pm nationwide ensued.

This is the new social condition facing the main character Siva. He returns to society after eight years in prison to discover a new reality where race and identity are socio-political and as an ex-convict, he falls into the fringes of contemporary society where the poor and marginalized live. He has become just like an immigrant, displaced psychologically, spatially and temporally. In this world of outsiders, he searches for his ex-wife and daughter who have left him. There are hints from the people he encounters that his past crime has damaged their lives. He embarks on this quest not only for redemption and salvation from those he loves and has hurt, but also for a desire for identity and sense of home.



## QUESTIONS

**What is the meaning of the title *A Yellow Bird*?**

The title *A Yellow Bird* derives from a saying my mother told me as a child. If I saw a yellow bird, I will soon receive good news or meet someone sweet. For me, it represents hope in an unexpected moment of life. It is almost unreal, you do not know for sure if it exists. That is why in the film we hardly see a yellow bird except one scene where it is dead. There are also species of birds that would rather kill themselves than live in captivity. Similarly, I question what happens when one is forcefully taken out of his natural habitat?

**Singapore is often portrayed as a bustling modern city yet your film mainly takes place in hidden, claustrophobic spaces. What did these “other” spaces contribute to your protagonist and his story?**

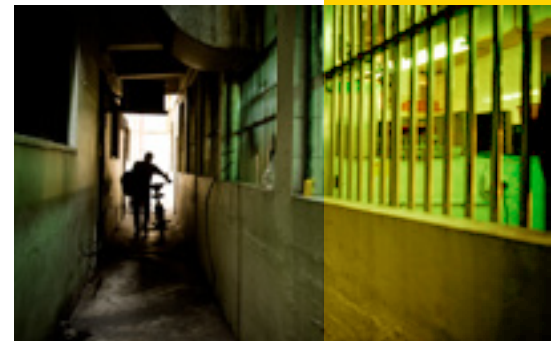
The question of personal space and the homeland is an important motif throughout his journey. Siva is looking for a utopia. After being rejected from his mother’s house, he finds shelter in void decks and makeshift tents in the forest. Her rejection is parallel to his relationship with the state. He does not navigate through modern parts of the city. Instead, he is drawn to familiar places, nostalgic spaces that have not been taken over by new developmental projects. Yet the concrete spaces appear to control and imprison him rather than

give him a sense of belonging. Space also controls the other characters. It is an unconscious dictatorial force. For example, the forest is where Chen Chensells her body and hides from the law.

Land and space in Singapore, much like the characters of the story and their spaces, are transient. It is the concrete world versus the reclaimed world. The visuals of the Singaporean landscape portray the country not as a commercial modern city but as a small island struggling to find new space by reclaiming land. It is during Siva’s explorations into unmanned territories such as the reclaimed shoreline and planted forests where he retreats from the oppression of the urban spaces to find introspection, desires, dreams, identity and ultimately, his destiny.

**Siva’s story is also told through the coming and going of other marginalised individuals around him, many living in between right and wrong. The most poignant is with Chen Chen where he begins to find hope. Can you describe his relationship with her?**

I am inspired by the existentialism depicted in Camus’ *L’Étranger* as well as Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The themes of marginalization, morality and judgment resonate very strongly with Siva’s identity as an Indian ex-convict. He confronts his internal conflict of the individual



versus the society in his search for new meaning. In this journey he encounters an enigmatic Chinese woman, Chen Chen, who is an illegal sex worker and funeral mourner trying to earn money for her family in China. Her issues about illegal status and the economy of the body reflect another prevailing tension between Singaporean Chinese and the New Chinese migrants, who are despised and discriminated for cultural behaviors that are different from our social norms. Her relationship with Siva develops because they uniquely understand the helpless circumstances of each other. It is both pity and empathy that draws them together, to mutually exploit each other for sex, money and emotional comfort. Rather than love, their connection comes from an instinct to survive in a harsh world where they are misjudged by society.

**Siva's journey leads him to an open-ended conclusion that is both brutal and touching. What was your intention to close the film this way?**

The journey is realized in the final climatic sequence where Siva discovers that he has caused Pushpa to become paralyzed during an accident as he was escaping from the police eight years ago. He witnesses her broken body that has been trapped in a bedroom for the last eight years, just as he has been locked in prison. He realizes that he has no more redemption -

the only thing in the world that still belongs to him, has been destroyed by him. He desires to break her away from the oppression of the bedroom and experience the world that she has been locked out from. Even if he has to break the law, he believes that this is his only salvation for the both of them. In this decision, I want to push the spectator to look beyond the comfort zone; to explore the soul of modern society; to challenge the perception of the outsider; by making them question the decisions that the characters make in order to live. Moreover, I also wish for a spectator to confront the edges of morality through the difficult and sometimes corrupted decisions of the characters. How does one judge a person's action if what they believe to be right, is illegal in the eyes of the law?





## K. RAJAGOPAL BIOGRAPHY

Born 1965, lives and works in Singapore.

As a filmmaker, Rajagopal has won the Singapore International Film Festival's Special Jury Prize for 3 consecutive years.

*I Can't Sleep Tonight* (1995), *The Glare* (1996) and *Absence* (1997) have been featured at international festivals around the world. Other works include *Brother* (1997), which was commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival; *The New World* (2008), commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore for the launch of their Digital Homeland Series; as well as *Timeless* (2010), which won Best Cinematography and Best Editing at the Singapore Short Film Awards 2011.

He directed segments in the omnibus films *Lucky 7* and *7 Letters* with other prominent Singaporean directors that have been screened at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam and Busan International Film Festival respectively. He has also written and directed television films, more notable *Anita's Complaint* and *The Boy Who Was Not There* for the Okto Channel. Rajagopal also worked on stage for over ten years. He has collaborated with many notable theatre directors on projects such as *Medea*, *Mother Courage*, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Beauty World* and *Private Parts*. After an 11-year hiatus, he appeared in the role of King Lear in *The King Lear Project* at Kunsten Festival Des Arts in Brussels and at the

Singapore Arts Festival in 2008. In 2012, K. Rajagopal was a recipient of the New Feature Talent Grant from the Media Development Authority of Singapore. *A Yellow Bird* is his first feature film.

## FILMOGRAPHY

### **I Can't Sleep Tonight**

1995, 15 mins

*Winner – Special Jury Prize, 8<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival*

### **The Glare**

1996, 14 mins

*Winner- Special Jury Prize, 9<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival Official Selection – 21<sup>st</sup> Hong Kong Film Festival*

### **Absence**

1997, 18 mins

*Winner- Special Jury Prize, 10<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival*

### **Brother**

1997, 15 mins

*Commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival in collaboration with Theatreworks*

### **Lucky 7**

2008, exquisite corpse

*Official selection – 37<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival Rotterdam*

### **The New World**

2008, 13 mins

*Commissioned by the Digital Homeland Series of Singapore Art Museum*



#### **Tiny Toones**

2009, TV documentary  
*Commissioned by Channel  
News Asia*  
*In Competition – Best  
Documentary, 15<sup>th</sup> Asian  
Television Awards*

#### **Asia at War**

2009, TV documentary  
*Commissioned by The History  
Channel*

#### **Timeless**

2010, 18 mins  
*Commissioned by the National  
Museum of Singapore*  
*Won – Best Cinematography,  
Best Editing, 2<sup>nd</sup> Singapore  
Short Film Awards*  
*In Competition – 57<sup>th</sup>  
Oberhausen Film Festival*  
*Official Selection – 7<sup>th</sup> Short Cuts*

#### **Asia Exposed**

2010-2011, TV documentary  
*Commissioned by Channel  
News Asia*  
*Official Selection – 50<sup>th</sup> New York  
Film Festival*

#### **Varanasi/ Jaipur (City Time Traveller)**

2014, TV documentary  
*Commissioned by Channel  
News Asia*  
*Special Mention – Best  
Info-documentary, 19<sup>th</sup> Asian  
Television Awards*

#### **Silent Screams (Acid attack victims in India and Cambodia)**

2014, TV documentary  
*Commissioned by Channel  
News Asia*  
*In Competition – Best  
Documentary, 19<sup>th</sup> Asian  
Television Awards*

#### **The Flame**

2015, 15 mins  
*Commissioned by the Media  
Development Authority  
of Singapore for SG50*  
*Official Selection – 20<sup>th</sup> Busan  
International Film Festival*





## PRODUCTION COMPANIES

**Akanga Film Asia** is an independent production company created in 2005 in Singapore to produce quality films by the new generation of Asian filmmakers. Our projects aim to create a cultural link between Asia and the rest of the world. Titles produced by Akanga include Ho Tzu Nyen's *Here* (Cannes Directors' Fortnight 2009), Boo Junfeng's *Sandcastle* (Cannes Critics' Week 2010), Vladimir Todorovic's *Disappearing Landscape* (Rotterdam 2013), Christine Molloy & Joe Lawlor's *Mister John* (Edinburgh 2013), Lav Diaz's *A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery* (Berlin Competition 2016 – Silver Bear Alfred Bauer Prize), Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* (Cannes Un Certain Regard 2016) and K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* (Cannes Critics' Week 2016).

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**Acrobates Films** is a French production company set up in 2002, dedicated to feature films of new talents with strong cinematic vision and contemporary issues. Our recent co-productions include: *Blood Appears* by Pablo Fendrik awarded at Cannes Critics' Week 2008, *Bi, Don't Be Afraid!* by Phan Dang Di awarded at Cannes Critics' Week 2010; *Adrift* by Bui Thac Chuyen awarded at Venice Orizzonti 2009; *Mekong Stories* by Phan Dang Di, International Selection Berlinale 2015; *A Yellow Bird* by K. Rajagopal (Cannes Critics' Week 2016).

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**Potocol** is a Singapore-based film company focused on the co-production of Asian short and feature films. Our first projects released in 2016 are *Hele sa hiwagang Hapis (A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery)* by Lav Diaz in Competition at 66th Berlinale; *A Yellow Bird* by K. Rajagopal in Competition at 55th International Critics Week and *Kapatiran (Brotherhood)* by Pepe Diokno in Official Selection at 51st Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

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