

LIGHTS, CAMERA, **ACTION**

Producer, director, Buddhist, Catholic, Irishman, Thai. **Tom Waller** is all of these things (and more), and has figured out how to make it work to his advantage. CAMERON COOPER meets up with him

TOM WALLER HAS two of everything, it seems. Two passports, two parallel careers, two production companies, two religions, two languages... (He even has two kids, as it happens.)

Meeting Tom for the first time at his house-based office tucked away in one of the back mazes of Sukhumvit, I had wondered what sort of accent to expect. Though Tom was born in Thailand to a Thai mother and an Irish father, his formative education was handled by Benedictine monks at a monastery school in Yorkshire in the UK.

In fact, his accent is relatively international, though sporting some soft Queen's English 'Rs' with very pronounced diction.

Like most *luk krung*, Tom is the product of two cultures handed down from his parents, plus the inescapable influence of embracing the differing mentalities of speaking two languages from early life. But what does he consider himself to be?

"Since I was educated in the UK, I guess you'd say I'm 90 percent Westerner and 10 percent Thai – well, unless it suits me to be otherwise. I understand the Thai mentality and can adapt to it readily."

His talent for doing so is a large part of his job, since he owns and runs two production companies – DeWarrenne Pictures and Tiger Entertainment – the former providing full movie production services in Thailand to Western filmmakers and the latter doing similar work domestically, as well as developing new film projects, with several currently in the works.

Most recently, Tom has been acting as the line producer (running the logistics of day-to-day movie production) for the Hollywood film *Mechanic: Resurrection*, the sequel to the 2011 hit, *The Mechanic*. The film stars Jason Statham,

Jessica Alba, Tommy Lee Jones and Michelle Yeoh, so he is breathing the rarefied Hollywood air on this project.

Tom is matter of fact about his primary occupation. "It is cool to walk down the street with Jessica Alba," he says, "but producing is my 'day job' that pays the bills and enables me to do my directing projects."

Directing, Tom's true passion, began at the monastery, where his entrepreneurial spirit also first showed itself.

"I started filming sporting and other events around the school. I discovered that parents wanted copies of those their kids had participated in, so we started selling them. We used the money to buy more advanced equipment – like Super VHS," he laughs.

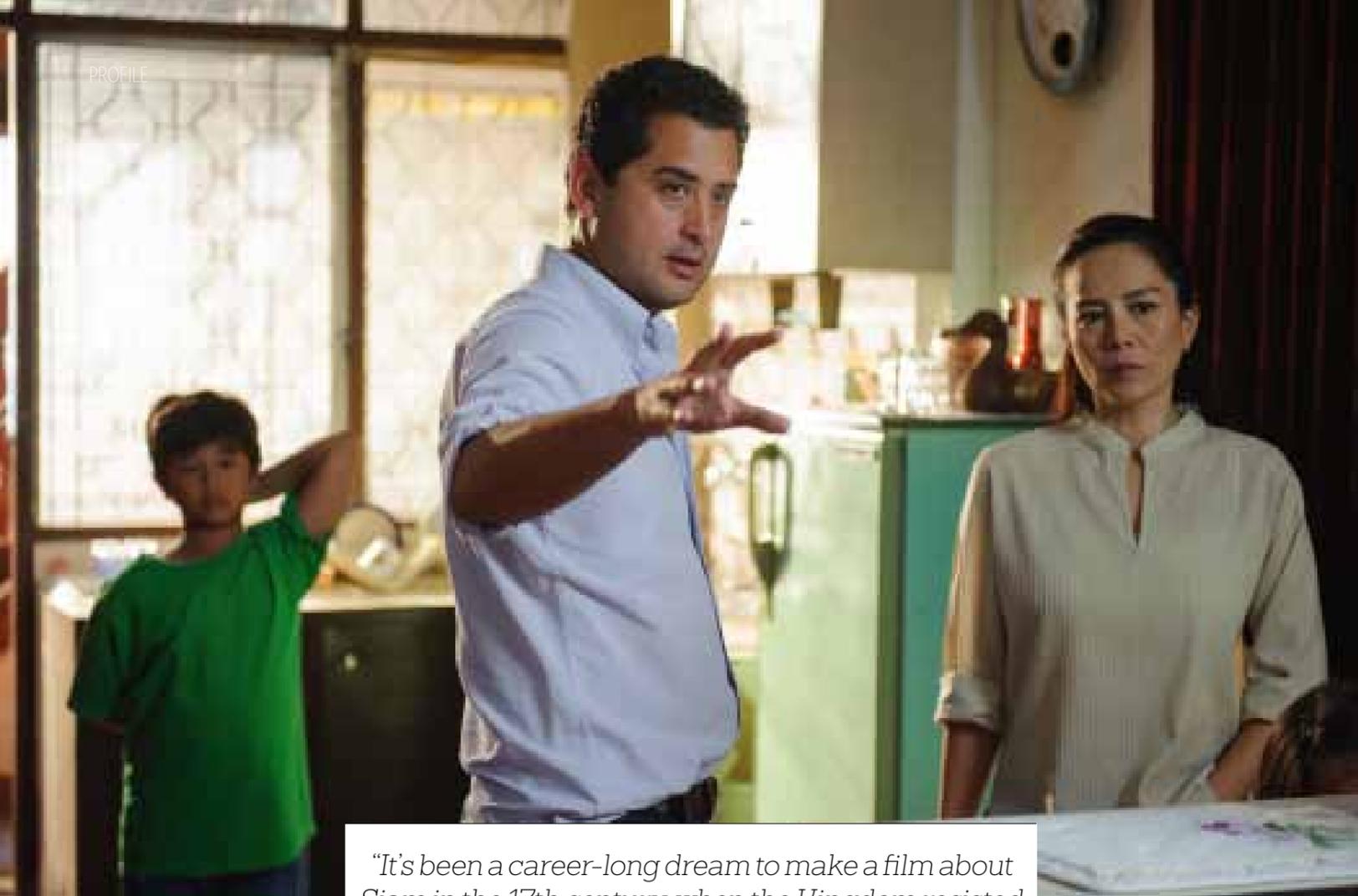
He also took part in a school film society that held screenings of major films on the school's ancient 35mm projector, which is where his love of cinema really began.

Later, through his Irish grandfather ("even in the West, nepotism goes a long way"), he landed an internship with Irish television, travelling around the Emerald Isle filming sporting events and learning the craft.

"Unlike a friend at school who had a vocation to be a monk, I had a vocation to become a filmmaker, which is similarly tough, because you are stuck with this 'illness' for life. But it is almost impossible to monetize this passion. So, like a monk, you have to give up all your worldly possessions, because as a filmmaker you are always broke."

At the tender age of 23, Tom managed to raise the funding and crew to make his first feature debut, *Monk Dawson*, a tale of moral conflict set





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in the 70s about a Catholic priest's fall from grace. The theme drew a line nicely under his past, and saw airplay on BBC UK and other countries.

The film "managed to claw back enough to not embarrass the investors... but I learned a lot – that was my film school," he says.

After years of frustration trying to secure backing for his next project, Tom returned to Thailand in 2002, and began producing independent feature films such as *Butterfly Man* and the ever-popular *Ghost of Mae Nak*.

"I saw a niche here, and preferred

to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond. In the West, it is tougher to prevail."

In the 13 years since his return, Tom has made his mark in the producing game, with numerous projects, even including the Tata Young music video *El Niño*.

Though it may be on the sidelines of his 'true vocation', Tom speaks with enthusiasm, and a little frustration, about producing.

"Basically, I help filmmakers execute their vision, so my day job is to facilitate people doing what I dream of doing – to be a filmmaker myself."

There can be a mountain of bureaucracy and official permissions to wade through ("They love their paperwork here"). Sometimes the bureaucrats meddle as well, like pushing for Jason Statham to use OTO products during the

film. "I can't make Jason Statham drink rambutan juice onscreen, it just doesn't work," Tom laughs.

Tom and his staff – almost all fellow *luk krung* – facilitate communication between the foreign and local talent – both cultural and linguistic. He walks the line between the two worlds – as he always has.

"We understand the situation from both directions... that Westerners want it now, while Thais might be a bit more elastic with deadlines.

"It can get heated. Some clients [particularly from a country that shall remain nameless here] want to start WWII because they believe

they were cheated out of 20 Baht. And if you shout at the speedboat guy because he is 15 minutes late, you end up with no speedboat for the day. The driver's been insulted and won't work for love nor money."

"You know, most foreign film companies come to Thailand thinking it is cheap and their budget will go further, but it doesn't necessarily work out that way. Many things must be brought in from abroad, and there is a lack of expertise in certain areas – say, like armoury and explosions.

"But almost every foreign filmmaker goes home feeling positive about their experience. Thailand is a pleasant place to work. The Thai crews work hard and are eager to please, so in the end, production can go very smoothly and the companies are happy."

So that's the 'day job'. But in the past couple of years, Tom has made a return to his first love of directing after more than a decade's absence, with two Thai films – both of which he also produced.

Mindfulness and Murder (2011), based on the book by Nick Wilgus, is the story of a former policeman turned monk who is compelled to investigate a grisly murder on the temple grounds.

The other, *The Last Executioner* (2014) is based on the life of Chavoret Jaruboon, the last of Thailand's executioners who executed condemned prisoners by machine gun.

Stylistically, both films reflect the slower pace of traditional Thai life compared to the West, though ironically, in film form this meditative pace is usually more admired and enjoyed by Western filmgoers.

The films have a central theme



of a conflicted protagonist (in both, very well-acted by Vithaya Pansringarm) who finds himself having to follow a path he would prefer not to, but does so out of a strong sense of duty.

In *The Last Executioner*, for example, Chavoret gives up his profession – and his passion – as a rock 'n' roll musician, taking a job at the infamous Bang Kwang prison when his girlfriend becomes pregnant. Proving himself to be of solid and reliable character, he is eventually promoted to head executioner, a role from which he derives

no pleasure whatsoever, and indeed is traumatised by it. It is a duty, something he must do to earn a living for his family.

Its release sandwiched between a *Transformers* film and *Planet of the Apes*, *The Last Executioner* spent just one week in local cinemas, so took in little money. "But that doesn't really matter that much," Tom shrugs.

It deserved better. But Tom is happy with the result. "I think we stayed true to the spirit of the man. He became more famous as an executioner than he ever did as a rock 'n' roller – which was what he had really wanted." It is a rather tragic story; doing what one must do rather than what one wants to do.

However, the film will have its European debut in April at the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy and Cinemasia in Amsterdam, where it seems likely Tom will win some well-deserved recognition as a director rather than as a producer – hopefully averting a career fate similar to the executioner's.

Tom's long-term hopes for the future reflect such a desire – and the duality of his roots. "I'd like to see Thai films on a world stage. Perhaps at the Oscars, or a BAFTA," he says. "If I can be a part of that success, I'd be proud of my contribution. It's been a career-long dream to make a film about Siam in the 17th century, when the Kingdom resisted European colonisation; an East meets West adventure in the grand tradition. I'm hoping that will be the movie to put us firmly on the Hollywood map."

And if he does achieve this goal, perhaps Tom, like the lead characters in classic film form, can finally live happily ever after. **P**

THIS PAGE: TOM WALLER ON SET

OPPOSITE PAGE: MOVIE POSTERS FOR *THE LAST EXECUTIONER* AND *MECHANIC: RESURRECTION*