

Gyalsey, legacy of a prince: Pioneering a new era in Bhutanese Cinema

JESSICA VERNON



Aine Carey



In his directorial debut film, Jamyang Wangchuck weaves a modern tale of unconditional love that is winning over the hearts of Bhutanese both young and old. Whether huddled around the bukhar in a farmhouse in Eastern Bhutan, or reclining at the private screening in City Mall Theater in Thimphu, audiences across Bhutan were moved to laughter and tears by Gyalsey’s story.

Three years after its original release in 2012, Gyalsey Legacy of A Prince is back on the film scene, reborn through a creative collaboration with the Bhutan Culture Company. “The overwhelming response has been that ‘there wasn’t a dry eye in the house,’” says Bhutan Culture Company’s founder, Aine Carey. The re-edited feature film premiered to audiences nationwide on December 12th, 2015 thanks to enthusiastic collaborations with BBS. While a crowd of 200 guests, including Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, screened the movie at an

invite only showing, the rest of the Nation watched simultaneously from the comfort of their homes as BBS aired the special on every TV in the Kingdom.

Fostering Creative Collaborations

Over the last eight years, Aine has been working closely with local artists and the DOIM (Department of Information and Media) to build up and systemize the local film industry, creating a responsible space for eager artists to thrive. Her latest endeavor to re-edit and promote Gyalsey Legacy of A Prince represents a commitment to the preservation of both art and the artist, and underscores their vital roles in a holistic society.

Inspired by local artists, guided by Aine’s experience, and strengthened through creative relationships, the Bhutan Culture Company empowers Bhutanese storytellers to share

their ideas with the world. By providing access to training, developing infrastructure and creating opportunities for collaboration, the Company seeks to connect emerging artists to the tools they need to make their dreams a reality. “Our vision is not only about sustaining contemporary artistic expression in Bhutan but about the preservation of a culture who’s wisdom, we believe, is of paramount importance to the wellbeing of the world community.”

Building A Sustainable Community For The Arts

Through its various creative partnerships, the Bhutan Culture Company wants to prove that a career in the arts is a valid, respectable, sustainable option in Bhutan. “Most people are afraid to pursue the arts because they’re pressured to get a ‘real’ job.” Aine says this mentality has to change if Bhutan’s artists are

to succeed. “You really can [build a career in the arts] and people do...If it can happen for one person, it can happen for anyone. This is why this project is important.”

Bhutan’s evolving film industry is a thriving example of how “art brings people together.” Jamyang—who wrote, directed, produced and starred in the movie—says the film industry is helping to break down societal barriers and reflect the cultural diversity of Bhutan’s people. Collaboration and community involvement are two fundamental factors not only in defining the success of his movie, but also in determining which path the Nation will choose on its journey towards modernity. The fruits of such collaborations are blooming throughout the local arts community; uniting individuals from all socio-economic and educational backgrounds and creating unique opportunities for employment and inclusion; an example Jamyang believes is especially important for



A still from *Gyalsey: Jamyang*

Gyalsey was inspired by a very good friend of mine.



A still from *Gyalsey: Jamyang*

Bhutan's youth.

While grateful for the public's praise for *Gyalsey*, Jamyang seems embarrassed about the title of Role Model; "If I can share my story, my experiences, I'm happy to do that. But being a role model... that seems very overwhelming. I'm overwhelmed just thinking about it. It's a big responsibility." Jamyang sees *Gyalsey* as a catalyst for things to come; "Maybe people will see that if I can do it, anyone can."

With the premiere behind them, Jamyang and Aine are focusing on the long term gains: "The point is to use this film to talk about the others...if this film can break the barrier and get international distribution, then hopefully Dechen's [Roder] film can too, and all future filmmakers... That barrier has to be broken. Everyone is a part of it." If *Gyalsey* is able to gain international distribution, it will be the second Bhutanese film ever to do so, (currently Khyentse Norbu's, (the "Rinpoche" film director) *Traveler's and Magicians* is the only Bhutanese film to receive international distribution).

Reflecting on the collaboration, Aine says, "Using my gifts and resources to polish *Gyalsey* and share it with the nation is my way of expressing my deep and profound gratitude for what the Kingdom has generously shared with

me these last eight years... it is a small gesture but I give it with a full and grateful heart."

A true artist's work, like that of the Bodhisattva, is for the benefit and enjoyment of all. If the future of our artists is to flourish, government agencies, business owners, media outlets, consumers and the arts community must come together to show these artists that they are respected and supported. The best way to show your support is by investing in the arts through whatever means are most accessible to you; be it time, money, or personal connections. These acts, however small, send the message that this type of work is important and that you understand your role in keeping these art forms alive and flourishing.

The Power Of A Human Story

Anyone who has been to Bhutan knows it is a place where stories hang in the trees as bountifully as the lichen draped on the branches of pristine forests. This treasure chest of folktales sets Bhutanese artists apart from the rest. "We are natural storytellers," Jamyang says of his countrymen and women; "We have a very strong oral tradition and we have wonderful stories." The tales recounted to Jamyang while visiting the homes of friends, and on his travels back to the eastern district of Trashigang, where he grew up, are what



A still from *Gyalsey*

keep him inspired. He is already working on several new projects to "document the everyday stories" of the people of Bhutan. "Film," Jamyang believes, "is the most powerful medium" through which we can share these stories—and their lessons—with the world today. As Bhutan morphs, evolves, and grows, the film industry can explore and reflect that; "These are time capsules. This is history. The nation has to understand why that is important to them."

In a culture steeped in rich traditions of storytelling and dripping in colorful folklore,

inspiration is as limitless as the landscape; one need only to look around them and listen to the stories of the people they meet. Bhutan's magic lives in the tiniest details; in ordinary things done in unusual ways; in the quiet moments and on gusts of wind; in the smiles of the people and the rosy cheeks of babes. This magic is forever epitomized in the sounds, colors, and images of Bhutan's bold artists.

The writer is an intentional wanderer, currently based in Thimphu, Bhutan, reveling in the beautiful conundrums of the capital city. To read more of her work, visit: www.jessicajvernon.com