



A Bhutanese film crew converses during the shooting of a film scene in Thimphu. —AFP photos



Bhutanese independent filmmaker, Tashi Gyeltshen Wangyel gestures as he speaks during an interview with AFP.



Bhutanese film goers gather ahead of a screening outside a cinema in Thimphu.

Mountains, makeshift cinemas: Bhutan's battle to make movies

When Bhutan's top director Tshering Wangyel finishes a film, he and his staff take to the Himalayan countryside for months at a time armed with a projector, tent, screen and tickets. Movie making in the isolated kingdom is strenuous business. Not only do you have to teach yourself the filmmaking basics, but you must lug a makeshift cinema from village to village to reach Bhutan's movie-loving population. Despite the lack of infrastructure, Bhutan's 25-year-old industry is thriving, with audiences in one of the most remote countries on earth flocking to homegrown movies that blend Bollywood with traditional Buddhist teachings.

"Currently, it takes us a year to cover the country for screenings. I used to do it myself all the time, now I send my staff," Wangyel told AFP in the capital Thimphu. "Last year, my boys took a car, a screen, a tent, a projector, tickets - they went from district to district, setting up a makeshift cinema in each venue or using school auditoriums." Many of the industry's directors and actors also have to juggle their passion for cinema with day jobs as soldiers, monks, even politicians.

Wangyel began his career in government, but the avid Bollywood fan, who grew up in a country where Indian musicals were a staple, always had movies on his mind. "I was living this mundane 9-to-5 life when I decided to make my first film: a love triangle about two college kids falling for the same girl," Wangyel said. Three of his friends acted in the 1999 production and contributed \$5,000 each towards the shoestring budget. Wangyel, then an official in the ministry of agriculture, wrote the screenplay and handled the camera, sound and lighting. He also made Bhutan's first musical number, lifting the

melody from a popular Indian film and convincing his cousins to serve as backup dancers. He released the flick, "Rawa" (Hope), in Thimphu's only cinema, the crumbling, rat-infested Lugar, currently under renovation. By the time he made his second, he realised that while production was a challenge, distribution was an ordeal, requiring filmmakers to carry generators, fuel and screening equipment from village to village. Forty movies later, he says distribution continues to be a slog, handicapping the industry's growth. The long wait for screenings has also fuelled a thriving piracy industry, with impatient audiences eager to watch illegal copies of the Dzongkha-language films. Despite these challenges, however, the industry has expanded substantially, with annual output jumping from three films a decade ago to 15 films this year.

Bollywood influence

Each year, it attracts new entrants like aspiring director Kiley Tshering, who turned a friend's bungalow into a film set and secured funds from a cousin, all to make his debut venture, "Nga Dha Choe" (You and Me). "Filmmaking in Bhutan is a community enterprise - friends lend their houses, relatives give you money, everyone helps out on set," Tshering, 27, told AFP on the sidelines of his shoot. The popularity of local films has seen fans give the boot to Bollywood productions, which are rarely shown these days in Bhutan's handful of cinemas after dominating screens for decades. However, the influence of the Mumbai-based industry on its Bhutanese counterpart is unmistakable.

Although a small number of Bhutanese films, including 1999's "The Cup", directed by a Tibetan Buddhist

lama, have found critical and commercial success overseas, viewers at home prefer movies with a dose of song and dance. "If a film is too artistic or realistic, it won't work. Our audiences like a formula - it must include songs, dances, humor and tears," Wangyel said.

Critics blame Bhutan's isolation, which only allowed access to television in 1999, and its limited exposure to world cinema for the formulaic but commercially successful productions. "The sad part is we say we are so proud of our culture but then you look at our films, it's like we have picked up a broken piece of mirror from Bollywood's vanity case," said independent filmmaker Tashi Gyeltshen.

But with movies based on Buddhist legends and actors usually dressed in traditional clothing - the wrap-around "gho" for men and fitted ankle-length "kira" for women - Bhutanese cultural identity lies at their heart. Plotlines often portray a clash between tradition and modernity, with conservatism getting the last word as characters hold forth on the importance of prayer and background chants urge viewers to be good Buddhists. Gyeltshen, whose short film "The Red Door" screened at the Rotterdam film festival this year, told AFP the relentless push to promote tradition while imitating Bollywood formula risked creating "a cultural desert" for future generations. "We are wallowing in past glory...we are not creating anything in terms of leaving a legacy," Gyeltshen said. "Everyone in Bhutan talks about the preservation of culture - but if you don't create, what will you preserve?" —AFP



Bhutanese make up artist brushes an actresses.



In this image released by A24 Films, Jessica Chastain, left, and Oscar Isaac appear in a scene from "A Most Violent Year." —AP

Oscar Isaac on the hustle of acting and 'Star Wars'

From playing a struggling folk musician to an ambitious heating oil entrepreneur, actor Oscar Isaac is all about the hustle. After his breakout in 2013's "Inside Llewyn Davis," Isaac's profile is on the rise with roles in the upcoming "Star Wars" and "X-Men" films. Isaac, 35, spoke to Reuters about the notion of ambition in his latest film "A Most Violent Year" and those pesky "Star Wars" questions.

Q: Did Abel Morales' ambitions in "A Most Violent Year" resonate with your own?

A: These tales of ambition are fascinating, and the rise to power, what power means. For me, I've never been interested in that, although ultimately it'd be great to find a story and be able to make it and to some extent, you do need a sense of power to be able to do it. It's not so goal-orientated, Abel is very goal-orientated. For me, it's less about a goal and more about a state of mind.

Q: Is there an aspect of "selling out" as you become more successful in your own career, and take on bigger roles?

A: Between my Llewyn Davis and

Abel Morales, the people tend to admire Abel a lot more, and it's very telling that they pick the person who's ambitious, goal-orientated, hyper capitalist. I think there's been a shift. I'm in "Star Wars" and going to be in "X-Men," I believe people can say that I've sold out, but I think there's a different feeling nowadays about 'hey man, you've got to hustle.' This country is based on the hustle, hustle for your dollar, whatever you've got to do, and you give props to the person that hustles the most. There is a sense of whatever you can get away with, more power to you.

Q: How are you planning to dodge "Star Wars" questions for a year? Are you allowed to drop any tidbits to satisfy curiosity?

A: No permission to satisfy curiosity. We finished shooting (in November), and there's a trailer out already so that's just a testament to JJ (Abrams, the director) and how much he loves what we've made. And it's also how much he loves the fans, that after three weeks being done shooting, he releases a trailer and it's so representative of what the movie's going to be, which actually has an intimacy, a vitality to it. —Reuters

The 13 most disappointing movies of 2014

Many Hollywood executives probably want to forget that 2014 ever happened. The studios overstuff the summer multiplexes with sequels - yet another "Spider-Man," "X-Men," "Planet of the Apes" and "Transformers" - which resulted in audience malaise at the box office (5% down from last year). The indies might have been better in terms of quality, but no title caught fire the way they used to, such as when sleepers like 2006's "Little Miss Sunshine" grossed \$60 million. And the latest fad in filmmaking - crowdfunding - turned out to be a bust with the release of two high-profile Kickstarter projects ("Wish I Was Here" and "Veronica Mars") that barely registered with audiences. If Hollywood wants the movie business to thrive against unprecedented competition (TV, video games, etc), the industry needs to do better, especially when it comes to original storytelling. Here are the 13 most disappointing films I saw in 2014.

13. "Magic in the Moonlight"
Domestic box office: \$10.5 million

Woody Allen's 49th time in the director's chair resulted in his most lackluster film since 2001's "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion." The script, which had Colin Firth investigating the practices of a phony clairvoyant (Emma Stone), felt forced even by Allen's standards, and he did his film no favors by casting romantic leads who are 28 years apart in real life.

12. "Big Eyes"
Box office: \$4.4 million (still in release)

This biopic about painter Margaret Keane was hyped as a return to Tim Burton's '90s prime (think "Ed Wood"), and bloggers were predicting it could finally win Amy Adams her Oscar. But "Big Eyes" is so bland, it doesn't even feel like a Tim Burton movie. The story collapses under an over-the-top performance from Christoph Waltz, who plays dishonest husband Walter Keane like he's channeling a Quentin Tarantino villain.

11. "Jersey Boys"
Box office: \$47.0 million

Hollywood has been trying to get this Four Seasons musical on the big screen for almost a decade, but Clint

Eastwood's adaptation was pitchy. He should have cast movie stars in the lead roles rather than banking on the stage actors like John Lloyd Young, who won the Tony for playing Frankie Valli. Another problem: Eastwood downplayed "Jersey's" musical-theater elements. These are words I never thought I'd write, but I wonder what Rob Marshall would have done with the production.

10. "A Million Ways to Die in the West"
Box office: \$43.2 million

How do you make people forget you bombed as host of the Oscars? You direct a movie that is even less witty than the lyrics to "We Saw Your Boobs." Seth MacFarlane's parody of Westerns - an idea as timely as its 1882 setting - squandered all the movie-making capital he earned from "Ted," which grossed \$219 million domestically.

9. "Grace of Monaco"
Box office: N/A

The Cannes Film Festival kicked off with this biopic starring Nicole Kidman as Grace Kelly. But the screen legend's extraordinary life story somehow felt small compared to all the backstage bickering between director Olivier Dahan ("La Vie en Rose") and US distributor Harvey Weinstein, who couldn't agree on a final cut of the movie. Dahan's version, which played at Cannes, was tedious. As a result, "Grace of Monaco" has yet to open in the United States, and it probably never will.

8. "Deliver Us From Evil"
Box office: \$30.6 million

Jerry Bruckheimer produced this horror movie that was in development for years and underwent numerous script revisions. Eric Bana (who needs better material) plays a New York cop fighting demons, but he couldn't bring this dreck to life.



Facebook generation rather than illuminating any new truths. And it earns the dubious title of the lowest-grossing movie of Adam Sandler's career.

6. "Wish I Was Here"
Box office: \$3.6 million

Zach Braff took to Kickstarter to ask his fans to chip in \$3 million so he could make a follow-up to "Garden State" on his own terms. But this indulgent, meandering comedy about a thirty something dad experiencing a midlife crisis is proof most filmmakers need studio supervision. Somebody should have reigned Braff in, especially during the "Ally McBeal"-like montages of him in a space suit.

5. "Veronica Mars"
Box office: \$3.3 million

This was another Kickstarter project that went off the rails. Director Rob Thomas collected \$5.7 million from 91,585 loyalists to finance a movie based on his cult TV series that was cancelled by the CW in 2007, but the finished product - shot so darkly, it was often hard to tell what was happening - played like an inside joke. "Veronica Mars" made the "Sex and the City" movie look like "Casablanca."

4. "Sex Tape"
Box office: \$38.5 million

The idea of this R-rated comedy was

7. "Men, Women & Children"
Box office: \$705,908

It's hard to believe that the same Jason Reitman who directed "Up in the Air" and "Juno" is responsible for this stilted meditation on how technology disconnects us from each other. Told in "Crash"-like vignettes, the movie speaks down to the

basically ripped from a "Mad About You" episode, where Paul and Jamie Buchman accidentally returned a sex tape to the video store and race around town to retrieve it. In the 2014 bigscreen version, the married couple (played by Cameron Diaz and Jason Segel) upload their dirty video on the cloud by mistake, and visit their friend's homes to delete it from their iPads.

3. "Inherent Vice"
Box office: \$967,000 (opens wide in January)

Paul Thomas Anderson, like J.D. Salinger in the later stages of his writing career, has abandoned narrative. Instead, we're left with beautifully shot scenes that feel like wandering in the dark, vaguely connected by a trippy performance from Joaquin Phoenix. I don't know what "Inherent Vice" is based on the Thomas Pynchon novel, trying to say, but I do wish the director of "Magnolia," "Boogie Nights" and "There Will Be Blood" would return to telling stories with a beginning and an end.

2. "Transcendence"
Box office: \$23 million

The least satisfying studio project of 2014 stars Johnny Depp as an artificial intelligence scientist who gets swallowed into a computer (allowing him to collect a reported \$20 million paycheck for very little screen time). The script, which was once featured on the Black List, is incoherent in the hands of first-time director Wally Pfister (Christopher Nolan's longtime cinematographer). "Transcendence," which bombed at the box office, is this year's "47 Ronin," only not as entertaining.

1. "Lost River"
Box office: N/A

Ryan Gosling's directorial debut premiered to the biggest jeers at Cannes, which prompted Warner Bros. to slate it for only a day-and-date limited US theatrical release. The bleak drama set in the future felt endless (at only 105 minutes) and plotless. But "Lost River" committed the worst crime of all by taking Gosling out of the leading man business, where his talents are most needed. —Reuters

