



Left and below: Hope Rosa's Suman Masciarelli is offering what she calls "smart luxury" with an element of science in her line of footwear. Each design goes through testing and grading, with an in-house scale that determines the number of hours a shoe can be worn without discomfort. PHOTOS: HOPE ROSA



Best foot forward: Local shoe brands in a post-Covid world

As the pandemic wears off, Singapore's footwear industry is finally picking back up; the founders of three home-grown companies tell their stories. BY RUSSELL MARINO SOH

WHEN the first cases of Covid-19 landed in Singapore, nobody could have imagined the profound impact the disease would have on the way we work, the clothes we wear, and – perhaps most intriguingly – the shoes we buy.

As work from home turned from unfeasible fantasy to regular reality, high heels and Mary Janes made way for Crocs and fuzzy slippers. Some people even ditched footwear, baring their soles as Zoom calls became par for the course.

But now, with more returning to the office and retail sales picking back up, *The Business Times* (BT) spoke with the founders of three local companies, to find out how they made it through the past three years, and how things have been since coming out on the other side.

Palola: Made-to-order women's shoes

Veteran shoemaker Joshua Leong and leather craftsman Jeremiah Ang's venture into women's footwear was sparked over a bowl of bak kut teh.

"Jeremiah asked me to teach him how to make a pair of ballet flats for his wife," says Leong. As he went through the process with Ang, they sparked the idea of a made-to-order line of shoes for women.

Palola was thus launched in 2017. "It was something that none of the other local or even international footwear brands were offering at the time," Leong notes.

But finding a factory to produce Palola's shoes was a tall order for him and Ang. "None of the factories we spoke to were willing to produce made-to-order footwear for us," Leong recalls. "They were operating on a traditional factory business model, which relies heavily on large minimum-order quantities."

So they bought their own factory in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, with one shoemaker to start. "I would drive into Johor Bahru four to five times a week to teach him," says Leong.

That came on top of juggling the other responsibilities of running a fledgling business: "We used to joke that at Palola, not only are the owners making the shoes, they're also the ones marketing them on social media, taking orders and selling them at our workshop, and even delivering the finished pairs to customers."

When the pandemic hit, Palola struggled to survive. Besides the sudden drop in demand, the company's performance took a hit from higher shipping costs, especially because its shoes are made with imported leathers and other materials.

To secure revenue in that period, the pair started selling discounted advance-purchase vouchers. "We were able to maintain a positive cash flow through the worst parts of the pandemic. This enabled us to retain all our staff," Leong says, adding that



salaries were kept stable.

As the pandemic restrictions were lifted, things recovered "tremendously", he says. "Our sales have been increasing year on year, with more and more Singaporeans learning about our brand, and being willing to invest in quality footwear."

In May this year, Palola moved into its flagship boutique at 68 Duxton Road. Next in the pipeline is a boutique in Australia.

Explaining the decision to expand overseas, Leong says: "Though the market in Singapore has been our primary source of revenue... there has been a steady increase of queries and sales from Australia via our e-commerce platform."

Now equipped with a team of 20, Leong says the brand remains centred on handcrafted quality: "There are some shoemaking processes that just aren't as good when done by machine... (so) we insist on doing them by hand."

While some quarters have expressed

Joshua Leong (right) says he drove to Palola's factory in Johor "four to five times a week" in the brand's early days. Its flagship boutique (above) opened in May. PHOTOS: PALOLA



doubt about the quality of shoes made outside Europe, he notes that the proof is in the pudding – or pump, in this case. "Many of those who've given our shoes a try have gone on to become our most loyal, die-hard customers."

Hope Rosa: Pioneering tech-centric luxury

Starting Hope Rosa was a natural progression for Suman Masciarelli. After a stint at Crocs as its director for e-commerce, she

felt it was time to bring technology-based performance to high-end women's footwear.

"We're building a lifestyle brand with what we call 'smart luxury', which has an element of science," she says, highlighting Hope Rosa's tech-centric approach to every aspect of its business model.

The company's shoes incorporate specially developed materials, such as one to replace foams that typically deform with time in shoes from other brands. Each de-

sign also goes through testing and grading, with an in-house scale that determines the number of hours a shoe can be worn without discomfort.

Developing all this took about two years, after which Masciarelli had a line that was ready to go to market.

Timing, however, did not play in her favour. Hope Rosa launched in department stores at the end of 2019, just before Covid-19 first reached Singapore's shores.

As borders shut and pandemic restrictions came into force, Hope Rosa was left with stock that it had to hold onto. But that gave Masciarelli time to conduct more product and market research, as well as build a greater online presence.

Still, physical retail continued to be a roller-coaster ride for the brand. "We had just been invited to do a pop-up at Robinsons in Raffles City," she recalls. "I worked until three in the morning setting up the space, got home after, and a friend texted me 'Have you seen the news?' – that was when I found out Robinsons had declared bankruptcy."

Sticking to her guns yet again, Masciarelli kept her booth open, even as other brands cleared out in a hurry. "There were people lining up outside the stores, and all the competition was leaving... So I said, we're going to stay and take advantage of the situation."

That turned out to be a good move, as customers continued flocking to the



Oleah's Clara Han takes a data-centric approach to designing shoes. She and her sister measured the feet of hundreds of friends to better understand the market. PHOTO: OLEAH

Continued on Page 19

ARTS

Hollywood talent manager sees rising demand for Asian actors

Following Oscar triumphs, industry veteran Andrew Ooi says more projects now offer plum roles for Asians. BY HELMI YUSOF

FOR 29 years, Hollywood talent manager Andrew Ooi believed there would come a time when Asian actors would no longer have to play bit parts in Hollywood productions. "That time is now," he says in a Zoom interview with *The Business Times*.

The Oscar success of the Michelle Yeoh-led movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) featuring a predominantly Asian cast, along with other Asian-led films such as *Minari* (2020) and *Parasite* (2019), has led to a shift in opportunities for Asian actors. They are now being considered for plum roles rather than being confined to playing stereotypical, nameless characters.

As CEO and president of Echelon Talent Management, a Vancouver-based agency, Singapore-born Ooi represents numerous Asian actors including Chin Han (*The Dark Knight*), Yeo Yann Yann (*American Born Chinese*), Celina Jade (*Wolf Warrior 2*), Osric Chau (*Supernatural*), and Lisa Lu Yan (*Crazy Rich Asians*).

Among his clients is 76-year-old Youn Yuh-jung, who won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Minari* in 2021 – an unforgettable moment for Ooi.

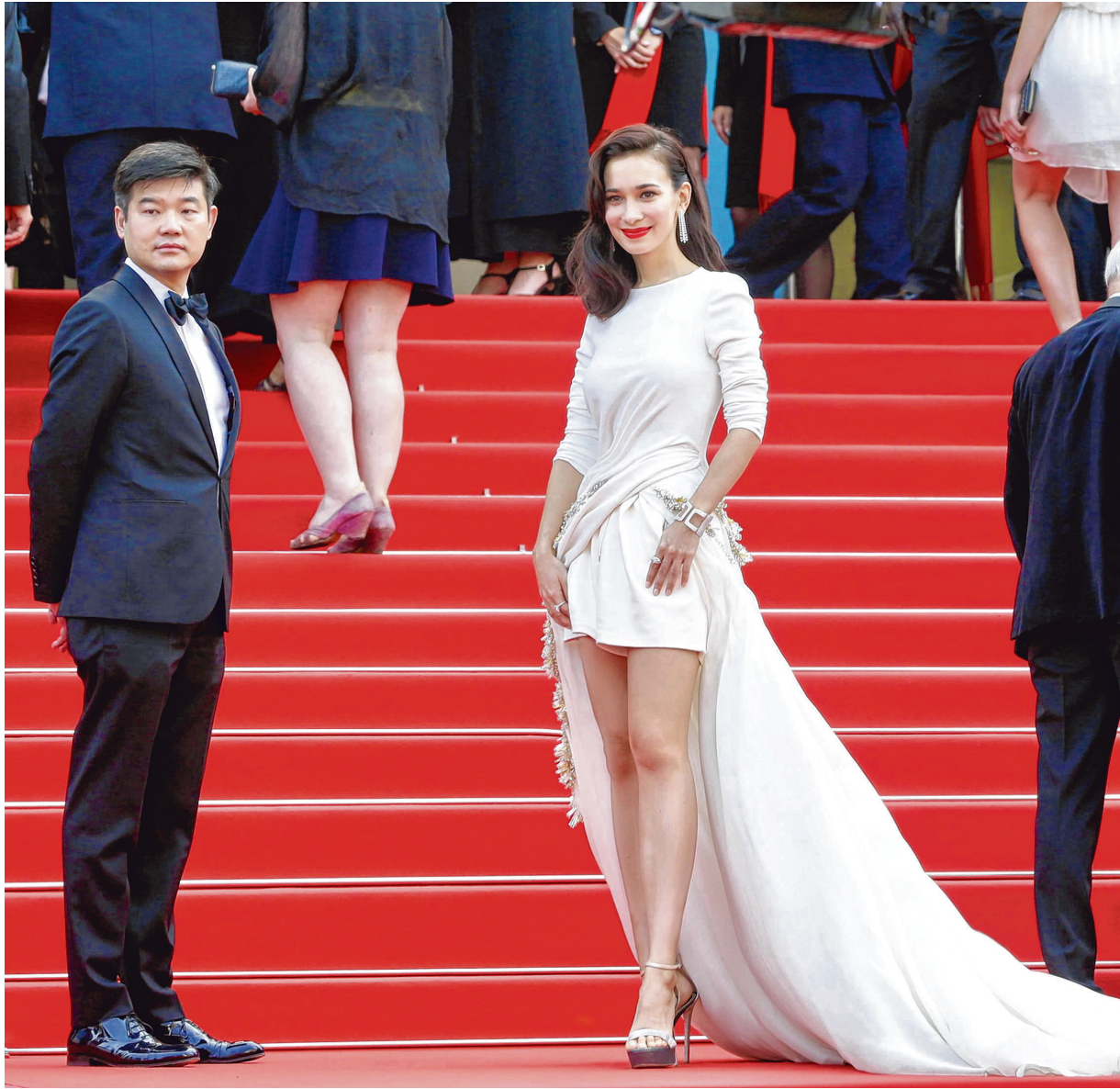
He says: "I'm seeing more projects out there for Asian actors. And they're not just in 'traditional' roles like 'waitresses' or 'medical examiners'. They're much more diverse now for much more diverse projects, across everything from TV shows to voice-over work."

He observes that in the last few years, there has been a big push among Asian Americans in the film and TV industry to look for financing and collaboration outside of Hollywood, such as in Silicon Valley, where there is a significant percentage of successful Asians.

"When they were debuting *Crazy Rich Asians*, for instance, the producers approached the people they knew in Silicon Valley to buy up entire screenings to show their support for the Asian community. And it worked in creating buzz and confidence. Asian Americans have the highest disposable income among all ethnic groups in the US, so they do have some spending clout.

"At the same time, the global popularity of South Korean entertainment, from K-pop bands to TV shows like *Squid Game*, has contributed to a movement that supports the rise of Asian projects... Asians are becoming part of the Hollywood conversation."

Ooi notes that the entertainment market has become more



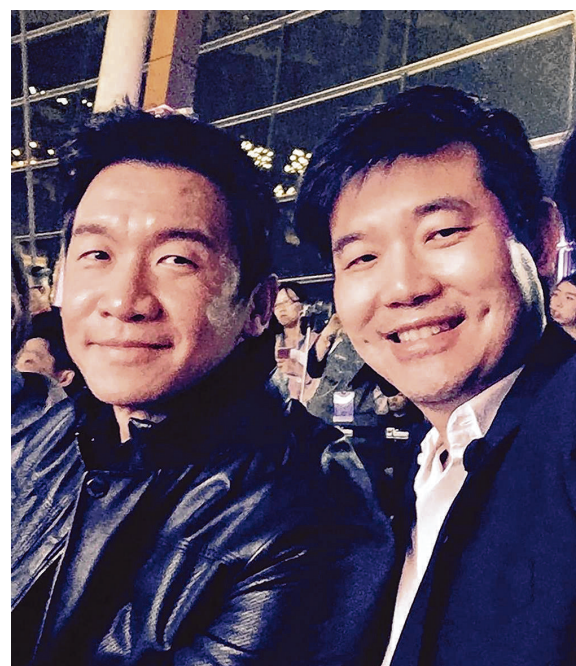
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Andrew Ooi

global, with audiences consuming entertainment from across the world.

"They want a great story first and foremost, and they really don't care where the story is coming from, and in what language."

Reflecting on his start in the industry in 1990, Ooi admits: "I was too idealistic then – I thought that



Above: Long-time talent manager Andrew Ooi with actress Celina Jade, who starred in *Wolf Warrior 2*, on the red carpet. Left: Ooi helped actor Chin Han to secure his part in *The Dark Knight*. PHOTOS: ANDREW OOI

the demand for Asian actors would increase in under a decade. But it took much longer for that to happen. But I'm glad to see it finally coming to fruition."

Despite these positive developments, Ooi remains cautious about expanding his roster of actors and signing new talent.

Currently, Echelon has about 30

actors under its management.

He adds: "For me, management is very specific: I need to know my clients very well because they're like my family members. It takes me a long time to find the client whom I get along with and want to work with every day."

"Because of that, I don't sign on new clients frequently – maybe on



Left: Andrew Ooi represents Korean actress Youn Yuh-jung, who won an Oscar for *Minari* in 2021. Below: Ooi with *Crazy Rich Asians* actress Lisa Lu Yan, whom he also represents.



average one a year."

For instance, Ooi has been working with the actress Lu since her 70s; she is now 96 years old. She still wants to work and Ooi actively seeks out projects for her. He values talent above all else, asserting that "looks are temporary, whereas talent sustains a career over several decades". Lu's latest TV project is *Career Opportunities In Murder & Mayhem* for Hulu, which is set to debut later this year.

Ooi acknowledges the ebb and flow of Hollywood trends, saying: "We don't know how long this embrace of Asian talent will last. What we do know, however, is that it's become increasingly expensive to

produce film and TV shows in Hollywood – whereas quality shows can be produced in Asia usually for a fraction of those budgets. So it is time for us to solidify our position.

"What I hope is that Asian filmmakers learn to produce content that has more global appeal, so that it doesn't matter whether the production is Thai, Vietnamese, Filipino or Chinese. If the story is unique and the production values are strong, that show will be watched, enjoyed and awarded prizes across the world. We must get the world to discover more Asian content. It's our time."

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Best foot forward: Local shoe brands in a post-Covid world

Continued from Page 20

department store until it finally closed in January 2021.

Hope Rosa has since moved to a fully-online model, and expanded its offerings to include handbags and watches. It has built a significant following, too, with some 40 per cent of its customers being repeat buyers.

Masciarelli is now looking to take the brand to the US, first through home-shopping television channels and e-commerce platforms, then department stores.

"Adversity harbours resilience," she says of Hope Rosa's journey, with all the poise of a seasoned entrepreneur. "If the business idea is right, then you need to stick to your plan – you can modify it, but don't give up."

Oleah: Designing for Asian women

When Clara Han left her corporate job in 2016 to enrol in a shoemaking course, starting a business was the last thing on her mind. "I was feeling burned out," she tells BT. "I just wanted... to do something completely different."

Learning about how shoes are sized and produced got her talking with her friends, and she soon discovered many had the same complaints about their footwear – there seemed to be a mutually exclusive relationship between style and comfort.

This got her wondering, and she figured there was a gap in the market here that she could fill.

To better understand the market, she and her sister measured the feet of hundreds of friends, compiling a database to inform the way their shoes would be constructed.

What they found was that Asian women's feet are typically wider in the front than European women's. "In order to fit into shoes (made by European brands), a lot of women actually size up to accommodate the front of their feet, and they end up having a gap in the back... so it becomes quite uncomfortable," Han says.

After over a year of research and development, Oleah was launched in 2018 with a line of shoes that merged Asian-focused fit with European-style luxury. Designed by Han and produced in Spain, the



Designed with Asian women's feet in mind, Oleah's shoes are wider in the front. PHOTO: OLEAH

"Rent was low, and there was a lot of supply (of space) – so we thought it was time to test the market."

Clara Han on expanding into a permanent physical space during the pandemic

shoes were initially sold through an online store and occasional pop-ups.

Surprisingly, it was the pandemic that gave her the opportunity to expand into a permanent physical space. "I never envisaged a situation in which people would not be going out or wearing shoes," she says with a laugh. "But rent was low, and there was a lot of supply (of space) – so we thought it was time to test the market."

A pilot at a coworking location proved successful, and she was able to sign a long-term rental agreement for her current space in Spaces@One Raffles Place.

"You would think nobody was buying shoes (during the 'circuit-breaker' period)," Han notes.

She says many women who had been buying non-leather, lower-quality footwear before the pandemic realised that their shoes had all fallen apart by the time they could head out again. This drove a desire to "buy less, but buy better", she says.

Still, the pandemic was a struggle for Oleah, mainly due to supply-chain disruptions. Han recounts that timelines for pre-or-

ders had to be extended as production and shipping delays mounted. However, constant communication helped the company maintain brand trust and loyalty.

That customer-centricity served Oleah well during the pandemic, and continues to be a hallmark of its business model. The brand has even built an overseas clientele, with fittings conducted virtually.

Those virtual fittings – in addition to in-person fittings that take place either in Oleah's physical space or customers' homes – enable Han and her team to take into account each customer's measurements to come up with recommendations for style and fit.

Looking back on the decision to start her own brand, she says: "I guess it was part naivete, part foolishness." It seems the risk has paid off, with the business' sales continuing to grow post-pandemic.

Han is looking to deepen the brand's international presence, starting with Malaysia and the rest of South-east Asia.

She also wants to put more resources towards research and development, and has started searching for external investors to make these plans a reality.

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