

Sound investment pays off

Electro-Acoustics Systems now banking on LED lighting

BY DHEVARAJAN DEVADAS

MR LAM Tong Loy could have taken a job in the family business - but then he would never have found himself working, indirectly, for Michael Jackson.

His father ran a thriving business as a garment and jewellery maker, so Mr Lam grew up with an interest in all things related to business.

But his passion lay elsewhere: He had his heart set on engineering.

"I did not want to join the family business as I wanted to make it through my own efforts," he said.

The self-confessed audiophile decided to study electrical and electronic engineering in Britain.

He is now managing director of Electro-Acoustics Systems (EAS), an installer of audio-visual systems for large-scale venues.

Getting qualified was a rough ride for the Chinese-educated Mr Lam. "I was also not very good in English, so I decided to study engineering because I thought it would be the easiest subject with the emphasis on numbers," he recalled with a sheepish grin.

After returning to Singapore, he joined Philips Singapore as an engineer and worked his way up to division manager in seven years. It was then that the entrepreneurial spirit, first nurtured during his childhood, was rekindled.

"There were not many companies in this field. The Government was also beginning its push for Singaporeans to become entrepreneurs, so I decided to strike out on my own," said Mr Lam, now in his 60s.

In 1982, he left Philips, and together

with partner Eugene Chan, started EAS with \$80,000 in start-up funds.

Mr Chan is now executive director, while Mr Lam's wife is a senior manager.

They offer services such as the installation of lighting and sound systems and multimedia infrastructure.

"It was very difficult in the first six months. Large contractors were very reluctant to assign big jobs like hotels and conference halls to a small start-up like us," said Mr Lam.

The company's big break came when it was given a contract in 1985 to equip the Monetary Authority of Singapore's offices with a multimedia presentation system, rare in those days.

The contract gave a big boost to EAS' reputation, and it soon won other large orders. "The recession in the mid-80s proved to be a blessing, as many firms and the Government took the opportunity to build infrastructure," Mr Lam said.

The company also diversified into the broadcast business in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, where he had strong contacts from his days at Philips.

This provided the connection that led to a project involving one of the world's most famous pop stars.

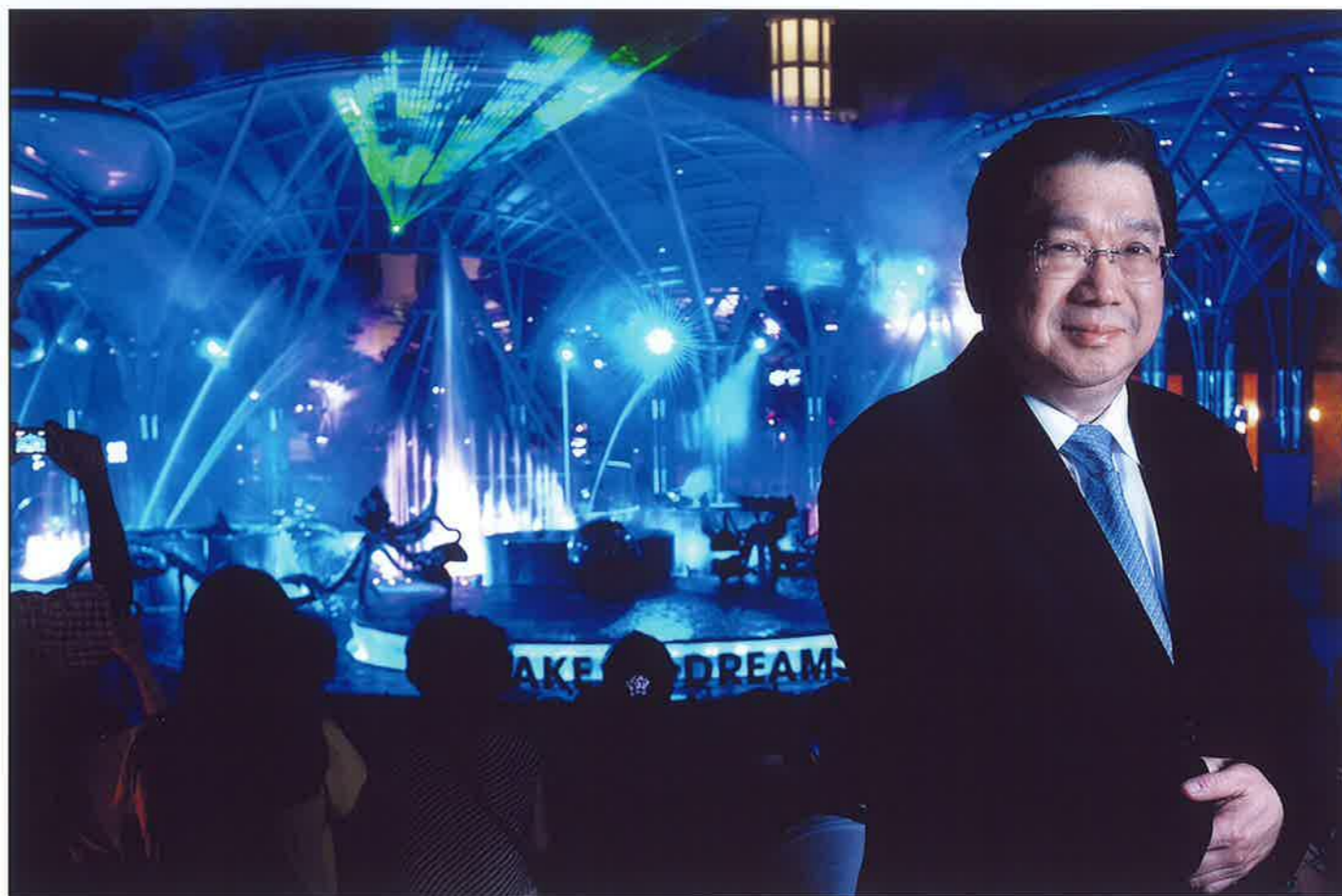
"Michael Jackson was going to perform there in 1996, and we were one of the only multimedia contractors operating there. So, we were given the job," said Mr Lam.

The company brought in large Japanese-made LED screens and installed them in three months. The screens were used to project the singer's image to enable more concertgoers to see him.

Other memorable moments have involved the occasional lucky break.

For instance, in 1997, he collected a RM2 million cheque for a project in Malaysia, cashed it and converted the amount into Singapore dollars. One week later, the Asian financial crisis hit, and the ringgit was devalued.

"It was a very stark reminder of how things change quickly in business," he said.



The Lake of Dreams at Resorts World Sentosa is one of the major projects Mr Lam's company worked on. Electro-Acoustics Systems also worked on the WaterWorld show at Universal Studios Singapore. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Of late, Mr Lam has taken the company to a new level by collaborating with world-renowned brands on iconic projects such as Universal Studios Singapore.

"We were contracted to do the multimedia infrastructure for several facilities in Resorts World Sentosa (RWS), like the WaterWorld show at Universal and the Lake of Dreams," he said.

A unique feature of the WaterWorld show is the strategically placed speakers that are so slim they are easy to miss.

"No matter where you sit, the sound will be the same. They are electronically directed to minimise echoes from sound bouncing off the walls," said Mr Lam.

The quality of the installations has won the company praise from clients.

"EAS gives the clients a family business level of attention, with technical delivery that meets the requirements of an international, world-class resort," said Mr Matthew Twist, assistant entertainment director at RWS.

"The personnel at EAS are able to build strong rapport with me. They are knowledgeable about the audio-visual industry and they can relate to my needs," said Mr Muhammad Hakim Salim, pro-

curement head of the Supreme Court, where EAS installed courtroom technology and audio-visual systems in 2004.

Ever on the lookout for new opportunities, Mr Lam is banking on LED lighting as the next big thing.

"With the current push globally towards green technology like LEDs, we want to focus for the next few years on expanding our lighting business," he said.

LED - or light-emitting diode - lights use a fraction of the power of standard incandescent bulbs to produce the same amount of light, while lasting up to 25 times as long.

Mr Lam revealed that just last month, EAS signed an agreement with United States lighting systems manufacturer Electronic Theatre Controls to become its regional distribution, training and service centre. "We have set aside an entire floor of our building for this centre," he said.

In all his years as a businessman, Mr Lam has never forgotten his father's business principles: Keep your integrity, be honourable and plan ahead financially.

"I have always made sure that I follow his advice in all my business dealings," he said.

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Turning up the volume

FOUNDED in 1982 by Mr Lam Tong Loy and his partner Eugene Chan, Electro-Acoustics Systems (EAS) has grown from a small start-up to an SME with big projects under its belt.

The company installs audio-visual and multimedia systems such as lights and speakers for large venues like conference halls and hotel ballrooms.

It has about 58 employees and offices in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei.

Combined company revenues for the last three years totalled \$60 million.

Notable projects it has completed include Suntec City Convention Centre, the Esplanade Concert Hall, the new Supreme Court building and the St Regis Hotel.

Last year, EAS was contracted to design and install multimedia equipment for hotels, theatres, public spaces and other attractions in Resorts World Sentosa and Universal Studios.