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BY KERRINE GOH
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Love and Death on the Rapid KL

FADE IN: MPH Bookstore Cafe, Mid-Valley Mall, Kuala Lumpur. The tall, dark and lanky gentleman seated in front of me could have played a heavy in one of JP Ramlee's 1960's classics. Instead, Hassan Abd Muthalib is undisputedly one of the last remaining "walking encyclopaedias" of Malaysian cinema. He may be in his early 60's but when one engages Hassan in a conversation about his lifelong passion (*filem* as they call it), the man becomes a child.

"People ask me when Malaysian cinema began," he says, mischievous eyes sparkling behind horn-rimmed spectacles, "I tell them centuries ago!"

Hassan excitedly claims it all began even before the technology was born in the late 1800s. Prior to the churning of first cameras, Malaysians of yore had the pleasure of viewing legendary epics play out as flickering shadows against a white screen – the timeless *wayang kulit*.

He continues, "And even then, folks would peer behind the screen to see how the magic works!"

Hassan is a treasure trove of facts and figures about the art and industry he's embraced since 1964. And for any Asian cinema researcher (like myself), he makes an excellent Square One. A self-made man, he began his film career as a graphics designer for the Filem Negara Malaysia, a government documentary studio. From there he graduated into scripting and directing public service plugs and broke into making animated shorts and docus. His *Sang Kancil* series established him as one of the forerunners of Malaysian animation. And his first documentary The Cane

bagged the Jury Award for at the 1989 Jakarta Asia-Pacific Film Festival. Today, Hassan continues to write screenplays as well as inspire a whole new breed of young Malaysian auteurs. But the man is hard to pin down. Just the past two months, Hassan has been circumnavigating the globe – presenting papers in Japan and London, sitting in film panels in India, lecturing in Norway, conducting workshops in Singapore and his beloved all around Malaysia. Despite this hectic schedule, Hassan is generosity personified giving precious time to anyone who cares to listen.

When asked about the present state of Malaysian film he excitedly comments: “Today, we have three types of filmmakers... First, the ones who work in the mainstream for whom fame and box-office results are most important. Second, we have independent filmmakers – like Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Yuhang Ho... who make films primarily to express themselves. And then we have filmmakers like Yasmin Ahmad who straddle both worlds and are in a class by themselves.”

CUT TO: The Leo Burnett offices at the Menara Olympia, along Jalan Raja Chulan, the heart of the business district of downtown KL. In the anteroom of her plush yet sedate enclave, Yasmin Ahmad is staring intently at a laptop – a 3d image of a white-washed villa is being presented to her by a team of architects. It is a proposed vacation house set to be built in dream island Langkawi – a gift to her mother.

As I enter the scene, an expectant look crosses her face, “Well?,” she asks.

I tell her I loved it. *Rabun* (My Failing Eyesight), that is.

Shot for television in 2003, it marks Yasmin’s film debut – the first in a series of oeuvres many claim have forever altered Malaysia’s cinematic landscape. It tells the story of an irrepressibly bubbly, elderly Muslim couple (expertly played by M. Rajoli as Pak Atan and Katrina Aziz as Mak Inom) and their attempts at starting life anew in the countryside. Despite its determinedly un-Hollywood pacing and seemingly uneventful storyline, the film caught the public’s eye and won the critics’ nod, both locally and internationally. (“It’s my favorite Yasmin film,” Hassan claims.) *Rabun* set the mold for her next three efforts *Sepet* (Chinese Eye, 2004), *Gubra* (Anxiety, 2006) and *Mukhsin* (2006). With its deeply personal voice, unforgettable characters and stark visual style, the four form a loose quartet on family and the relations between the various peoples that make

up the heady cultural soup that is contemporary Malaysia. The films have reaped their share of international recognition – Mukhsin recently won the Best ASEAN Film Award at the 2007 Cinemanila International Film Festival as well as the Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk Grand Prix of the Berlin's International Film Festival. And at the time of this writing, Yasmin has been invited to present a retrospective of her works at 45th Golden Horse Film Festival in Taiwan.

Despite all this attention she claims, "I only make movies to please my parents. If they like my work, I'm happy."

But not everybody seems to be equally pleased. The lady enjoys mix-matching characters of different racial and religious backgrounds. *Sepet* and *Gubra* both focus on the relationship between a Chinese Malay boy and a Muslim girl. And this stirs up righteous gasps from certain sectors. Yasmin's critics run the gamut from well-meaning friends ("her films present an idealized, romanticized view of Malaysia") to rabid attackers. The latter even go to the extreme of condemning her as a "polluter of (Malay and Muslim) culture".

However all this affects her inside, Yasmin always manages to keep a cool front.

"You can't please everybody", she philosophically states, "I'm a romantic individual. That is why my films are so."

I had the pleasure of previewing her soon-to-be-released *Muallaf*. Though the texture may be the same, the film marks a departure from her previous works. *Muallaf* again essays the story of a Chinese Malay boy from Penang and his encounters with a pair of runaway Muslim sisters.

"In a way I feel I am those two sisters," she says thoughtfully, "I find myself running away from unpleasant experiences."

Yasmin claims that among her films this new work has elicited the most polarized reactions: "Some people love it, some hate it!"

And the work does seem edgier than her others. For one, the religion aspect is all out on the table – a topic that most artists skirt around in a country like Malaysia. Also, this time she doesn't spare us the domestic

violence, both physical and psychological, that can exist in an extreme patriarchal setting. Maullaf may be less approachable than her other works but, for this writer (and a newbie to Malaysian movies), Yasmin Ahmad's films make a perfect entry point to the Malay/Muslim sensibility – highly nuanced, wise, witty and deeply compassionate – completely unlike the B&W picture painted by Western mass media.

My interview ends at sunset. The lights go up in her Creative Director's den. Yasmin nonchalantly arranges her prayer mat and dons her immaculate white hijab (prayer garment). As she kneels on the floor, she turns to me with her lovely smile, points to my videocam and says, "It's alright. You can take a shot of me... I know you're going to do so anyway."

FLASHBACK, a week before my interview with the lady: Suriya Shopping Mall beside the iconic Petronas Twin Towers at the KL Commercial Center. It is the height of Malaysia's 50th Merdeka fever. During an unscheduled foray into the Petronas Museum of Art at the mall's 4th floor, I stumble into a small side room where a slew of award-winning Petronas-sponsored tvcs are running in a loop. I sit to rest my aching feet. And stare at the visually stunning pieces of advertising work projected on the wide screen. It turns out to be a sobfest – every 60 seconds or so, I'd nearly break down and cry as I witness a micro-story where Malaysians of all colors and creeds would join hands and hug in idyllic, often nostalgic settings as they celebrate the power of cultural diversity.

Later I find out they are all Yasmin's handiworks. I think to myself: they laud her for these race-bending ads and at the same time crucify her for her cross-cultural romances. Strange.

FLASHFORWARD: Rush hour on the Putra line, from Masjid Jamek to Bangsar. I make a frantic dash from Yasmin's offices to the equally posh Bangsar Village to interview filmmaker Bernard Chauly. It's a now or never thing - he's set to fly to London the next day to get hitched and has graciously granted me an hour to pick his brains. The train weaves its way thru the KL Central Station. I look around the almost spotless, air-cooled carriage: little Muslim girls in their dainty white-over-sky blue uniforms; a modish Chinese Malaysian couple deep in conversation; an old Indian Malaysian grandmother in a florid sari carrying shopping bags; and the usual spattering of noisy tourists in sandals and shorts, bulging with backpacks and beltbags. Yes, it's a Yasmin Ahmad movie alright.

As I run through the new Bangsar Village Mall I get an epiphany: KL is carpeted with wall-to-wall spankingly new, airconditioned malls – from Titiwangsa to Kajang, from PJ to Ampang. Even the Central Market in Pasar Seni has plastic air!

Bernard Chauly has two full-length features *Gol & Gincu* (2005) and *Goodbye Boys* (2006) in his cap. Both are about the joys, despair and modern-day angst of Malaysian yups and preps.

“I make films that are accessible to all types of people,” he claims, dispelling the rumor that indie filmmakers only make movies to confound the audience.

Gol & Gincu was a hit it spawned a popular television series with the same title.

But he promises his next full-length project will have more gravitas. He states: “This time it’s based on my family, my roots. Bernard is a half-Punjabi, half-Chinese Malaysian (yes, verrry Yasmin again!). His father died when he was still a tot. And was brought up solely by his mom who also passed on a year back.

“She was a very strong-willed character who worked against all odds to raise me and my sister,” he states, “I want to make a movie about women like my mother. At the same time I’d also like to delve into my Punjabi roots.”

When asked about the present state of independent Malaysian Cinema, he laughs: “We’re a small but a very tight group of filmmakers. Sometimes we criticize each other’s films but that doesn’t keep us from working together and appreciating each other’s efforts.”

I heave a heavy sigh as I think of the tribal mini-warzone that sometimes define the Pinoy indie scene.

CUT TO: mid-morning, the side street behind the imposing Berjaya Times Square Complex in downtown Bukit Bintang. First-time full-length filmmaker Brando Lee orders a roti canai (light wheat pancake served with curried lentils). He asks what I want. I say black coffee. Both he and the

waiter stare at me for a full second. It takes a couple of minutes for him to convince the waiter that I just want coffee – no susu (milk), no sugar.

I nearly swoon when I take my first sip –it’s uber-expresso on speed!

Brando started off writing for local TV but his dream has always been to direct films.

As he eats, I gab about the seeming prosperity of Malaysia : from the first-world KL International Airport to the flashy KLIA Express through all the malls and the efficient train/bus systems. It must have been the kope buzz for I find myself rattling about how the UN might be moving on from Malaysia since it’s achieved one of its development goals – a zero-poverty status.

“That’s a lie,” he casually states as he takes a sip from his *susu’d* coffee, “You should get out of KL more often. And see the life outside this ‘cement garden’...”

Being a Chinese Malaysian, he adds that his film *Tauho* is just that – about ordinary folks in a grittier KL, warts and all.

He adds: “Nope you won’t see the Towers or any of the touristy attractions in the b.g.”

Yes, *Tauho* is definitely no *Cinta* (a mainstream romantic-comedy hit). Brando lends me a screener of his film and dashes off to a meeting with a prospective producer. Unlike Yasmin whose other life as an ad executive supports her indie filmmaking, Brando has to forage around for angels with golden hearts/purses to finance the next project.

SERIES OF SHOTS: a three-storey building behind the Central Market. At the top floor is The Annexe, an art gallery known for its cutting-edge exhibitions, performance art shows and special events. The place is also a safehouse for visual and performing artists as well as indie filmmakers. Just a week ago, fellow Filipino Khavn dela Cruz screened his experimental opus *Squatterpunk* at the second floor alfresco cafe before an appreciative audience secretly sipping Tanduay Rhum. Today it is the venue of The Freedom Film Festival, an annual event showcasing new Malaysian shorts as well as the best of recent international indie works.

The three-day event has developed a sizeable following – mostly cineastes, artists and scholars on the look-out for brave, new works that unabashedly put risqué issues on the white wall. Screenings are usually followed by lively discussions.

Today is also the book-launching of Amir Muhammad's new book, *Malaysian Politicians Say the Darndest Things*, a brave collection of verbal and written flubs made by government bureaucrats and public figures.

"I'd better get a copy before the book gets banned," Malaysian film-expert and Monash professor, Benjamin McKay, exclaims. Born in Australia but Asian at heart, Benjamin has written books and articles chronicling the development of Malaysian cinema. One of his monographs focus on the works of Amir.

There is a long queue for the book in the jam-packed halls. Pang Kee Teik, the gallery's artistic director, doubles today as a book and dvd hawker.

"Get your copies now," he cheerfully announces. To a youth checking out one of Amir's dvds he adds: "Buy it. It's really excellent. Guaranteed to make you laugh... and also make you angry!"

I get one book, Amir signs it with a simple "To Ed, Salamat!, Amir M." Secretly I calculate how much the autograph will garner me if it does get banned.

You see, Amir Muhammad is the "bad boy" of the Malaysian indie scene. His 2006 full-length *The Last Malay Communist* managed to ruffle feathers and caused quite a stir involving the FINAS (the national film body), the Ministry of Education and other government institutions. Banned locally, the work managed to get a life in foreign festivals abroad. (I got my pirated copy from my favorite dvd candyman!)

His other films *The Big Durian* (2003), *The Year of Living Vicariously* (2005), *Tokyo Magic Hour* (2005) and *Village People Radio Show* (2007) have also figured in various international festivals.

Non-Amir moonien bitch that he deliberately sets a fire under the authorities' asses to be controversial – in turn, adding to his icon-smashing glamour abroad. But at look at the soft-spoken man's CV proves

otherwise.

“Amir started out very young, writing incisive columns even when he was in his teens,” claims Benjamin. He adds, “It’s simply ironic that the ones putting Malaysia on the world map are independent filmmakers like Yasmin and Amir... and they’re the ones getting flack!”

Amir is also one of the partners of a dynamic indie consortium call Da Huang Pictures which includes James Lee, Yuhang Ho and Tan Chui Mui.

L.S.: the Da Huang Pictures office, at the bohemian Brickfields area just outside KL Central Station. The four-room apartment includes a kitchenette, a conference table, an editing room and walls lined with posters of indie productions. The place is a happy mess that’s felt the brunt of many a creative brainstorming sessions. Da Huang’s strength lies in their collaborative, almost incestuous spirit. Each of the four partners help each other’s directorial efforts in one capacity or another – for example, Tan Chui Mui produced some of James and Amir’s films, Yuhang edited her flick, and so on.

“Indie filmmakers HAVE to work together because of limited resources,” claims the prolific James during our ambush interview. We first eyed the tall filmmaker as couple of weeks ago when he appeared as an actor in the Five Star Center’s play Bunga Mangga Bunga Raya (directed by the visionary Marion D’Cruz). The play was a light-hearted romp that dealt with difficult, perplexing issues confronting the contemporary Malaysian – cultural diversity, modernisation versus tradition, language, the individual’s relationship with the state, nationalism and more.

When asked if there are recurrent themes and leitmotifs that pervade the Malaysian indie scene, he answers in the negative.

“Malaysian indie films cover a wide range of subject matters,” he states, “in my case I make movies about relationships... and not just the usual romance thing.”

A scan of his titles (eighteen since his debut piece *Ah Yu’s Story* in 1998!) show a certain attachment to a certain four-letter word: *Goodbye to Love* (2004), *A Moment of Love* (2005), *Before We Fall in Love Again* (2006) and *Things We Do When We Fall in Love* (2007).

He laughs when we point this out to him and adds: “Well now I’m doing a commercial movie in 35mm. And it’s a psycho-horror film!”

After James leaves we get a chance to talk to Da Huang’s hands-on manager, Tan Chui Mui.

“I can’t even start my new film because of all the admin and management work,” she laments with a smile on her pixie face.

She shares with me her life story. Of growing up in the only Chinese Malaysian family in the predominantly *bumiputra* (indigenous Malays) seaside village of Kuantan, East Malaysia.

“We were in the fishing business,” she states. Chui Mui found herself taking up animation in a Melaka. She had her first taste of indie films when she attended a film screening organized by Amir and James. Wanting to share this brave, new experience, she organized film screenings and talks in her school.

“I wanted the students to get inspired by Amir, James and their works,” she claims, “but I ended up the only one getting bit by the bug.”

She then got invited to do second-unit photography for Amir’s *The Big Durian*.

“Unfortunately, he only used a couple of my shots,” she laughs. But the rest is history so they say.

Tan Chui Mui’s first full-length *Love Conquers All* bagged the New Currents Award at the 11th Pusan International Filmfest in Korea. She recalls having emailed Yasmin Ahmad for some financial assistance regarding this project.

“Yasmin has never heard of me but she handed me a cheque worth RM 4,000 anyway,” she adds.

And the lady believes in paying it forward: the sizeable cash prize that came with her Pusan victory has now been funneled into an up-and-coming Malaysian indie’s full-length, Liew Seng Tat’s *Flower In The Pocket*.

“The deal is that he help produce somebody else’s work should Flower win some money in festivals abroad,” she states.

When asked if her works have some feminist slant, Chui Mui takes a minute to ponder and states: “I’ve often be asked how it is to be a woman, Chinese Malaysian, independent filmmaker. I guess labels are important in the beginning... All I know is that I just make films.”

Touche!

Her pet peeve? “My films, along with James and Yuhang’s works, are in Chinese. And so, they’re not considered Malaysian films,” she says ruefully, “Our films don’t get the incentives other (Malayan) filmmakers get. And they’re taxed as if they were foreign films.”

But this odd piece of info doesn’t dampen the Da Huang spirit. Aside from each individual’s other bread-butter commitments (e.g. ads, television, publishing, etc), the company consistently come up with new, exciting works each year.

“But maybe we’ll cut down the number of productions next year,” Chui Mui states. She sadly projects that Da Huang Pictures may have only a couple of years left before it throws in the towel.

Despite all the international accolades, Malaysian indies are often left to their own devices. The films rarely get a screening in malls and other commercial venues. Aside from foreign festivals, they manage mostly with school-based and art-house exhibitions.

Their staunchest venue is the long-running *Klab Seni Filem Malaysia*, a film society now based at the HELP University’s Pusat Bandar Damansara campus. The club’s programming mix of European and Hollywood classics, as well as the best of Asian cinema is designed by its head, rabid cineaste Wong Tuck Cheong.

After a screening of award-winning Filipino indies at their theatre (including *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, *The Bet Collector* and *The Road to Kalimugtong*, as well as some Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival shorts), and over some te tarik (frothy tea with milk), Tuck Cheong only have good words share about the Da Huang filmmakers.

“The four make some of the best Malaysian indies around. But each one has his and her own distinctive style,” he claims, “Amir’s films are a bit cheeky. James’ is all about angst-filled relationships. Yuhang’s *Raindogs* captures life in a smalltown to a tee...”

I tell him about Chui Mui’s sad forecast.

This makes both of us silent. We resolve to get out of our cinematic doldrums by planning to hie off to some secret mall in Petaling Jaya after the screenings. And treat ourselves to excellent roadside Chinese cuisine, Tiger beers and perhaps a couple of bootleg Fellinis, Kurosawas and Hertzogs.

END CREDITS: my windowless room at the La Salle dorm in Bukit Nanas. Nope. It ain’t easy being an indie in Malaysia. For one, there’s always a stinking feeling that some Big Brother’s out to get you. But then again, it’s never stopped any of these stout-hearted folks – in fact, they’ve become experts at being very “creative” in the telling of their tales.

As I prepare to leave this land of vegetarian delights, opulent bookstores and RapidKL’s from paradise, I make one wish for Hassan, Yasmin, Bernard, Brando, the Da Huang directors, Tuck Cheong, Benjamin and the rest of the good guys: “just keep on keepin’ on...”

Forward-looking Malaysia seeks world-class status. And its indie filmmakers are making short work of that. Despite barebones support, they do it with a lot of panache.

My fearless forecast: with the world at your heels, waiting for your next story... AND as the title of Marilyn’s last unfinished flick proclaimed *Something’s Gotta Give*.

By Edward Cabagnet

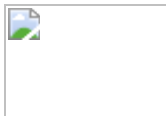
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