

# Screening Indonesia: A New Era?



**FILM PRODUCTION IN INDONESIA IS INCREASING AND BRIONY KIDD DISCOVERS THAT A VANGUARD OF FILMMAKERS ARE BATTLING CENSORSHIP, LACK OF GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE AND A RELIANCE ON FORMULA TO MAKE BOLD AND INNOVATIVE FILMS.**

IT'S the last week of August 2007 and the 21 Cineplex chain is screening thirty-five films across Indonesia. Eight are local productions. The rest are American imports, except *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), a French comedy and a British gangster flick. The Indonesian releases consist of three teen comedies, three supernatural horror films and two melodramas, but only two are likely to leave much impression: *Cintapuccino* (Rudi Soedjarwo, 2007), based on a popular teen novel, and *Lantai 13* (*13th Floor*, Helfi C.H. Kardit, 2007), a slightly above-average ghost story.

Meanwhile at Blitz Megaplex, a new player and the 21 Group's main competitor, five out of the fifteen films playing are Asian, but none are Indonesian. At least not this week: *The Photograph* (Nan T. Achnas, 2007), attracting praise for its subtle yet accessible style, has just finished its run; and next week will see the release of *Opera Jawa* (Garin Nugroho, 2006), an epic 'gamelan musical'.<sup>1</sup> (Evidentially Blitz is positioning itself as the choice of the more discerning viewer; not exactly an arthouse cinema but about as close as you can get to it in Indonesia unless you're attending a film festival.)

The current level of film production in Indonesia is impressive, especially given the many obstacles faced by producers – from the lack of government support to the widespread availability of pirated films on

VCD and DVD. Spirits are high, with talk of a 'renaissance' of the industry. But all is not quite as rosy as it seems. Budgets are low: even 200,000 tickets sold can seem like a hit if you're shooting on digital for around US\$100,000 (~AU\$113,000).<sup>2</sup> Derivative genre films aimed squarely at fifteen- to 25-year olds make up the bulk of domestic releases. 'It seems like pretty much everybody and their dog can direct a film right now,' says Paul Agusta, a critic and emerging filmmaker from Jakarta. 'There's a huge interest in local films. People feel, "Let's just flood the market with whatever."'

## The Indonesian vanguard

Dormant for most of the 1990s, Indonesian filmmaking has re-emerged strongly in the post-Suharto era. Last year saw the release of a record number of home-grown films at sixty,<sup>3</sup> up from twenty-five the year before and just three in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The sudden upsurge in activity can be traced back to a handful of success stories, like children's musical *Petualangan Sherina* (*Sherina's Adventure*, Riri Riza, 2000) and teen romance *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (*What's Up With Love?*, Rudi Soedjarwo, 2002), with private investors flocking to the industry in the hopes of buying a hit of their own.

For director Nan Achnas, who grew up in Kuala Lumpur and graduated from the Jakarta Institute of Arts Film School, where



she now lectures, filmmaking has always been a difficult path. 'You just have to have staying power and obsession, almost a fixation,' she admits. *The Photograph*, at a cost of US\$400,000 (~AU\$450,000), substantial by Indonesian standards, is an Indonesia/France co-production with support from the International Film Festival Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund for films from developing countries. Achnas admits to weariness, having spent six years taking *The Photograph* from concept to screen, but she has no regrets:

*In countries like South Korea, like Iran, there's always some money from the government to make films that are not really for the mainstream market. That is not available here. I make films not purely for the mainstream market [so] I get my funding outside.*

Garin Nugroho, who has directed eight features since his debut with 1991's *Cinta Dalam Sepotong Roti* (*Love is a Slice of Bread*), agrees that courage is a requisite for a filmmaker in Indonesia. Respected for making films throughout the 1990s, when virtually no one else was, Nugroho has earned a reputation as the country's foremost auteur. For him, film is a dialogue with audiences, a means of engaging politically and emotionally with the issues of the day. He has chosen subjects as varied as the lives of street kids in Yogyakarta for the naturalistic drama *Daun Di Atas Bantal* (*Leaf on a Pillow*, 1998), to the aftermath of the tsunami in Aceh for *Serambi* (Garin Nugroho, Tonny Trimarsanto, Viva Westi, Lianto Luseno, 2005), a documentary collaboration with four young directors.

Like Achnas, Nugroho relies heavily on foreign partners. *Opera Jawa* is an Indonesia/



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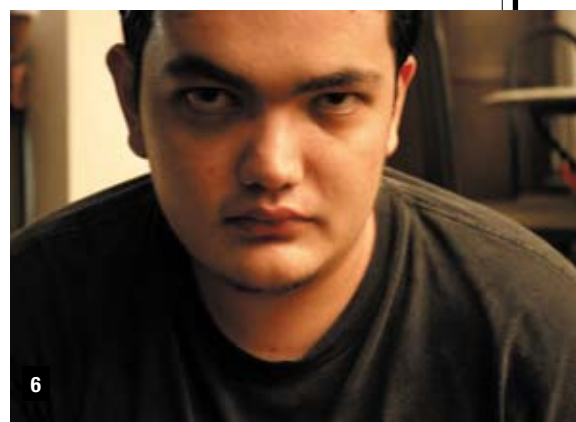
IMAGES 1-5 SHOW *THE PHOTOGRAPH* – 1: NAN ACHNAS DIRECTS SHANTY ON SET (© SALTO FILMS). 2: SHANTY (© SALTO FILMS). 3: SHANTY AND KAY TONG LIM (© PETITE LUMIERE). 4: NAN ACHNAS, KAY TONG LIM AND SHANTY ON SET. 5: NAN ACHNAS ON SET (© SALTO FILMS). 6: PAUL AGUSTA (© PAUL AGUSTA). 7: *OPERA JAWA* (© PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL).



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Austria co-production based on the story of 'The Abduction of Sinta' from the ancient Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*. It was commissioned by the New Crowned Hope Festival, Vienna's celebration of the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. The film screened in competition at the Venice Film Festival, where *Variety* reviewed it as 'bold and innovative', if a little heavy on metaphor.<sup>5</sup> Nugroho states his intentions as follows:

*Opera Jawa is a requiem ... for the killing fields which have been born out of the conflict of extremes across the world; conflict in a society filled with anxiety. It is a requiem for various kinds of grief – caused by disasters, caused by conflict, grief for all the bloodshed throughout the world.*<sup>6</sup>

Foreign support for Indonesian films does seem to gravitate towards films considered worthy and historic: like *Gie* (Riri Riza, 2005), an ambitious but disappointing biopic of 1960s activist Soe Hok Gie. With *Gie*, rumoured to have had a budget of upwards of US\$1 million (~AU\$1.13 million),<sup>7</sup> the problem stemmed from conflicting agendas, with the film enjoying the support of organizations like the Hubert Bals Fund on one

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Nan Achnas

hand and a major Indonesian tobacco company on the other. Paul Agusta explains:

*It was neither an art film/personal film of the director, nor a commercial film: it was trying to do both. It cast a very popular actor [Nicholas Saputra] in the role of an important historical figure who wasn't even of the same race – simply to, hopefully, draw in an audience ... I'm not sure the film even made ten per cent of what it cost to make.*

Nugroho and Achnas must be admired for their idealism – their process generally consists of developing stories from an artistic perspective and then seeking financing that won't compromise this vision – but other successful filmmakers are adopting a different approach, making highly commercial films with an indie sensibility. A recent ex-



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ample is *Berbagi Suami* (Love For Share, Nia Dinata, 2006), put forward as Indonesia's hope for a Best Foreign Film nomination at the Academy Awards. Directed by the filmmaker famous for bringing the first gay kiss to Indonesian cinema in *Arisan!* (Nia Dinata, 2003), *Berbagi Suami* deals with the impact of polygamy on the lives of three women. Its controversial subject matter undoubtedly contributed to its box office appeal.

Another audience favourite last year was *Mendadak Dangdut* (Suddenly Dangdut, Rudi Soedjarwo, 2006), in which an alternative rock singer on the run from police rein-



vents herself as a *dangdut* star. (*Dangdut* is a form of pop influenced by Indian and Arab styles.) With a fun, campy style and a marketable soundtrack, *Mendadak Dangdut* was shot in seven days. And then there's *Maaf, Saya Menghamili Istri Anda* (Sorry, I Impregnated Your Wife, Monty Tiwa, 2007), a risqué comedy marking the directorial debut of a well-known screenwriter.

The great example of this kind of filmmaking is *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, featuring young stars Nicholas Saputra and Dian Sastrowardoyo in a high-school love story that, though predictable enough, is infused with charm and authenticity. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* sold over a million tickets domestically,<sup>8</sup> in a year when only seven other Indonesian films were released.<sup>9</sup> It also gained a following in countries like Malaysia and Japan. But as Agusta notes:

*Ada Apa Dengan Cinta? was premature hope. People got too excited about that. You don't get excited over one hit. Or even two or three – two or three hits don't make an industry. The Berbagi Suami thing, that made a lot of money, but then what else made money that year? Mendadak Dangdut made money, but that was because it was shot so cheaply.*

Meanwhile, it's no easy feat to characterize the nature of Indonesian films. There may be a few favoured themes and styles, and certainly a taste for melodrama is strongly in evidence, but what really makes a film Indonesian? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. For Agusta, perhaps it's something that has yet to really emerge:

*There isn't a single original voice here. Everybody is copying somebody else .... Nobody has a distinct style and it's very hard to capture what is 'Indonesian' in films. The only director so far that I think has been able to capture that, or come close to capturing it, is Rudi Soedjarwo.*

Rudi Soedjarwo's films are natural in tone, often humorous, and are notable for focusing on ethnically specific characters (Indonesia, after all, is made up of many diverse cultures, each with its own flavour and identity), demonstrating that commercial ambition need not be at the expense of integrity. At thirty-five, Soedjarwo has already directed eleven features.

Soedjarwo casts actors he admires, whether or not they are the biggest names avail-

able. He also insists on an extensive rehearsal period, a practice which runs contrary to the norm in Indonesia. (Apparently some directors don't even talk to actors on set, leaving this to their assistant director).

Soedjarwo's films are not perfect – the edgy melodrama *Tentang Dia* (About Her, 2005) is marred by some overblown moments, while *9 Naga* (9 Dragons, 2006), a compelling insight into the lives of Jakarta street thugs, suffers from uneven pacing – but they are diverse in subject and always have something to say. Agusta notes:

*His films make a lot of money, and he also shoots them very cheaply, and fast, [but] his scripts are solid. You get a good story and everything else just falls into place.*

### Getting past the censors

But filmmakers like Soedjarwo haven't escaped controversy: when he made a horror film called *Dendam Pocong* (Angry Ghost, 2006), it failed to gain the approval of the Indonesian Censorship Board, due to scenes depicting the racial riots in Jakarta in 1998. The director had no option but to re-shoot the film in its entirety, but released this new production as *Pocong 2* (Ghost 2, 2007) in protest, the sequel to a film that was never seen. Soedjarwo again courted trouble with the tagline for *9 Naga*: 'The best man in Indonesia is a criminal', which had to be removed from posters, along with a glimpse of a male actor's bellybutton (covered by a large red cross on the DVD cover, proof of a much-needed sense of humour).

Nan Achnas' films feature little sex or violence, so she doesn't feel too personally constrained by censorship. But she has strong views on the subject: 'You can appeal but sometimes people just can't be bothered. "Okay, just cut it." I think it's wrong, we should appeal it. It's really outdated.' It's difficult to disagree when a film like *Buruan Cium Gue!* (Kiss Me Quick!, Fido Purwono, 2004) could be banned because its title was considered to be condoning premarital sex. Those speaking out against the film – which featured one chaste kiss between the two leads – had reportedly not seen it.<sup>10</sup> But as Agusta notes:

*[The Censorship Board will] still cut out things or ban films, but they're not really your biggest problem here. The biggest problem [is] the religious groups. If you do*

*something just a little bit to offend them, you'll never hear the end of it.*

Garin Nugroho knows this only too well: the recent premiere of *Opera Jawa* was tainted by the hostility of a Hindu group from Bali, angered by what they called the film's 'misunderstanding' of the *Ramayana*. Nugroho may be used to such setbacks by now, but he can't help but feel some bitterness:

*Opera Jawa was designed as a showcase of Indonesian multi-culturalism, in particular Javanese multi-culturalism, through its aesthetics ... and also through the choice of a heterogeneous group of actors and crew members. It was publicly denounced without an opportunity for any prior dialogue or a chance to show the film in its entirety.<sup>11</sup>*

### If it ain't broke ...

Of course, there's also the secondary danger of self-censorship, with filmmakers subconsciously shying away from difficult issues. It also doesn't help that investors feel safer sticking with the familiar. 'There has to be different sorts of films out there because there are differences out there, different sorts of audiences,' says Achnas. But she's not surprised by the general lack of vision:

*It was the romantic teenage drama and then the horror genre came and now it's the comedies, and I predict it's probably the erotic films next because history repeats itself.*

Agusta agrees:

*I think the problem is there's a lot of the same people from that old industry; a lot of the same producers. They're too stupid to know that they're just screwing things up again.*

While Nugroho sees such films as a way of 'hiding from reality', for Agusta it's the approach, and not the genre itself, that offends. A self-confessed horror fan, he can only make one recommendation out of the dozens of recent horror releases, *Pocong 2*, and dismisses the rest as banal rip-offs of Japanese or Korean films: 'We're not trying to tap into the subconscious, we're copying the style of other countries.' There's even a tendency to steal from Indonesian films of the 1970s and 1980s, the heyday of the genre, repackaging good ideas with gimmicky stylistic flourishes.

This year's crop of films reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the industry. Most films being released are by-the-numbers horror, melodrama or comedy; and yet there's room for the likes of *3 Hari Untuk Selamanya* (3 Days to Forever, Riri Riza, 2007), a road movie in which two cousins discuss life and love against a soundtrack by Jakarta band Float, and *Kala* (Dead Time, Joko Anwar, 2007), a conspiracy thriller boldly combining sci-fi and crime elements.

While Indonesian films are appearing on the international festival circuit, such exposure is still uncommon. (For example, the only Indonesian film at last year's Melbourne International Film Festival was *Gie*; this year it was *Opera Jawa*). Perhaps there's just not enough good work being released, but deserving films are undoubtedly hampered by the Indonesian government's limited interest in the sector. And yet small gains are being made, like the Department of Culture's recent move to sponsor film festival booths. Meanwhile, 'arthouse' filmmakers like Achnas and Nugroho must rely on overseas sales (the market for such films remains insignificant at home), never easy to secure. Achnas says:

*Indonesia is different because we don't have an Indonesian diaspora, compared with the Indian or the Chinese ... Let's say if you want to reach the United States you have to have an Indonesian community that will watch the films ... Without it, it's a little bit difficult ... What the industry should be aiming for are probably films like Iranian films. They don't have an Iranian diaspora, but then they have this image of the sort of films that they make, which is very humanistic, very human values, a lot of it is for children, so it sells outside.*

Still, there's an element of cultural cringe in Indonesian society and external validation often matters more than it should. 'You're not good until you're recognized outside,' says Agusta. 'If you're recognised locally, so what? "Oh my God, you won an award in Belgium? Wow, you must be good."' "

Indonesia's strength as a filmmaking nation lies in the eagerness of the public to see Indonesian stories on screen, with teenagers in particular flocking to see even sub-standard offerings. But the industry is in a state of flux and, some say, reaching crunch time. Agusta notes:

*Films are tanking left and right. And it's get-*

*ting harder and harder to find investors. If this persists we won't have an industry in five years, because [producers] have gotten complacent. They've gotten used to just getting away with making mediocre product ... There are people who are out there, proud of making crap.*

Complicating matters is the media's tendency to laud each isolated success as a breakthrough. Film culture in Indonesia is relatively undeveloped, with little serious film criticism, and the hype surrounding a box office sensation tends to overshadow any real discussion of the film itself. This can be hard on filmmakers, who are elevated before their time and just as quickly find themselves yesterday's news. Understandably, Indonesia is hungry for stars; and if this means praising a particular film excessively or casting the same actor in too many projects – well, these are mistakes to which other struggling film industries can relate.

### A new Indonesian cinema?

Indonesia may go on to develop a sustainable industry of small, well-crafted films, taking its place, as Garin Nugroho suggests, as a 'small tiger' of Asia, alongside countries like Thailand and Malaysia. Or film production will simply grind to a halt, collapsing under the weight of expectations – investors abandoning a sinking ship.

According to Achnas, 'In an industry, there's always room for all sorts of films. But now, right now, there's only room for films that make money'. Under such conditions it's difficult to see how the industry can nurture young talent or mature the film culture.

Paul Agusta believes that a distinctly new sector is emerging: a truly independent cinema – and he intends to be in the thick of it. At twenty-seven, having graduated from film school at Arizona State University in the United States, Agusta has been a film critic for two national newspapers (*The Jakarta Post* and *Kompas*) and director of an international short film festival (Jakarta Slingshotfest 2006). Now that he's ready to make his debut feature, a thriller that will go into production next year, he has made a deliberate choice to circumvent the usual channels. The project will be self-funded and Agusta and his collaborators hope an overseas sale to DVD will enable recoupment of costs, and maybe raise enough to fund their next film. Agusta is in no hurry to

seek a theatrical release in Indonesia.

For filmmakers like Agusta, the answer is to choose radically different financing and distribution models, decentralization away from the capital city, small budgets – and riskier filmmaking. The growth of a vibrant independent scene can only be positive, with the pseudo-independent filmmakers of the mainstream challenged and inspired by those working outside the current system (itself barely a decade old and still evolving). However today's generation of filmmakers chooses to reinvent the industry, it's clear that the next few years will be critical to the future of film production in Indonesia. As Agusta says:

*It just comes down to individual filmmakers realizing that you are in an infantile industry. You need to just grow, very slowly, very small pictures. Focus on what's right: developing good scripts.*

Briony Kidd is a writer and filmmaker from Tasmania.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Gamelan' describes an Indonesian music ensemble featuring a large variety of metal percussion instruments. It may also use voices and some string and wood instruments.
- <sup>2</sup> Tony Ryanto, 'Indonesia Grows Local Filmmaking', *Variety.com*, <[http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_story&articleid=VR1117915555&categoryid=1743](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117915555&categoryid=1743)>, accessed 25 August 2007. All currency conversions are correct as of 28 September 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> John Badalu, 'Is the Local Film Industry Undergoing a Revival?', *The Jakarta Post*, 23 December 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Ryanto, op. cit.
- <sup>5</sup> Jay Weissberg, 'Opera Jawa', *Variety.com*, <[http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_review&reviewid=VE1117931511&categoryid=31](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_review&reviewid=VE1117931511&categoryid=31)>, accessed 25 August 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Garin Nugroho, *Opera Jawa* Press Kit, Pyramide Films.
- <sup>7</sup> Lisabona Rahman and Paul F. Agusta, 'Many Local Films, But Has Quality Improved?', *The Jakarta Post*, 29 December 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> Tony Ryanto, 'The Screening of Indonesia', *Variety.com*, <[http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_story&articleid=VR1117881415&categoryid=19](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117881415&categoryid=19)>, accessed 25 August 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Kenny Santana, 'Don't Judge a Magazine by its Cover', *The Jakarta Post*, 16 July 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Nugroho, op. cit.