

Sarawak Millennium Film Festival 2002

By Brandon Wee

Fall 2002 Issue of KINEMA

The inaugural edition of the SMFF transpired over seasonal monsoon spells in the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

An official first for Malaysia, the SMFF is a project by the state government and organised by the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in Kuching. There have been previous attempts by various industry parties (mainly in Kuala Lumpur) to establish the country's introductory film festival, but the continual lack of funding has ensured that this prospect remained a dream, until now. So it is with much anticipation that the SMFF joins the spirited posse of young Southeast Asian film festivals, behind Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. With a primary mission to trace the dynamics of Southeast Asia's cinemas, the SMFF's other objectives include promoting the region's independent and student films, sharing problems, exploring new technologies in distribution and exhibition, and networking for co-operative efforts, investment and financing.

It's also opportune that the birth of the SMFF comes at a time when Malaysian cinema is being garlanded with attention internationally. *Cinemaya*, in a cover story on Malaysia (Spring 2001), highlighted a younger generation of filmmakers seeking contemporary societal concerns as their thrust for cinematic expression. And *TIME* magazine has, to Malaysia's delight, declared Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2000) as "the best Malaysian movie to come along in decades". Although this is sensational, the film (an SMFF selection) has travelled widely to praise; its themes of friendship, interracial relationships and the tradition-modernity polarity being played out in a familiar parable that exudes much empathy for its characters. The film also has the distinction of being Malaysia's first picture in English, inadvertently contributing to this vague notion of "universal appeal."

It may be rather surprising that metropolitan Kuala Lumpur is not hosting the festival instead, despite a concentration the arts and film activities there. However, Sarawak, Malaysia's largest state isn't all that curious a venue considering that she is presently embarking on a campaign to hem tourism and culture squarely at the hip. "Asia's Best Kept Secret" boasts valuable rainforests, indigenous tribes like the *Iban*, and the sweetest pineapples this tongue has tasted. In endorsing the SMFF, the government has realised the economic potential in promoting Sarawak as a location for filmmaking and has accordingly urged filmmakers from the region to capitalise on its heritage and historical folklore for storytelling promise.

Despite the festival's infancy and baby budget, the experience was pleasurable. It ran over four days at the Crowne Plaza Riverside Hotel and Cineplex in downtown Kuching, comprising a 2-day conference and 3 days of screenings. Highlights from the former included presentations by local and regional filmmakers, critics, academics and institutional representatives covering topics as broad as national cinemas and indigenous film cultures but also concerns as intimate as the creative process. Forums relaying filmmaking perspectives from Malaysia, Singapore and Southeast Asia also drew hearty responses.

Over 40 films were screened, ranging from features, shorts, experimental films and documentaries from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Cresting the wave of digital features were Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000), James Lee's *Ah Beng Returns* (2001) and Djinn's *Return to Pontianak* (2000). The premiere show was Osman Ali's *Bukak Api* (2000), a socially conscious essay both brave and heartfelt. Translated as "Open Fire" but meaning to fornicate in street lingo, the film was originally produced as an educational video to promote safe sex and "to empower the marginalised (transsexual) sex worker community (in Kuala Lumpur)." Its development into a feature has been based on actual accounts of transgendered sex workers besieged in a climate of religious and social bigotry and has involved the efforts of civil society groups and persons close to the subject.

A final thing to mention is the issue of censorship, which will probably develop as a central discussion topic in future festival editions. There are at least two provocations for this. Firstly, in realising the significance of a country's non-economic needs, Malaysia's situation is analogous to Singapore's. But although Singapore's censorship standards have become more compassionate over time, rulings still tend to be fickle. How committed is Malaysia then to negotiating matters of regulation at the onset of her crusade for cultural

consciousness? Secondly, *Spinning Gasing's* yearlong run-in with the censors is legendary. The initial ban, numerous appeals, twenty-six cuts and then popular appeal have betrayed the disquieting incongruity between artistic integrity and public morality as sanctioned by the authorities. The question stands: can liberalness be matched with forbearance?

Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).