

## Editorial

### ***Gema Dari Menara* (1968), Brunei's first feature film**

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*The film was a revelation to me because I was not aware of any visual record of such a culture in pre-independence Brunei. Until I saw the film, my impressions of Bruneian culture came mostly from hearsay and oral history [...] to put it bluntly, Gema Dari Menara is not a very good film at all, but is nonetheless a time capsule of Brunei's lost pop history.*

*Gema Dari Menara*/Echoes from the Minaret: A Conversation with Mervin Espina about the Lost Cinema of Brunei (Espina, 2013: 70)

*Gema Dari Menara* (Echoes from the Minaret), Brunei's first feature film, was originally screened on 23 October 1968 at the New Boon Pang Theatre to popular reception. In 2014, it was re-screened at a lecture theatre in The Core, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), through the efforts and cooperation of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UBD and FITREE (*Persatuan Filem dan Teater Evolusi*/Film and Theatre Evolution Association). According to Dato Paduka Haji Mahmud bin Haji Bakyr, a former Director at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (National Language and Literature Bureau), this 2014 screening sparked a new nostalgia for the 1968 film (2018:5). This culminated in a reunion between the film's cast and crew in August 2018, followed by a celebration of the film's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 23 October 2018. This celebration was a collaborative effort between the Malay Language and Linguistics and Malay Literature programmes at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences UBD, FITREE and the cast of *Gema Dari Menara*, and supported by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Brunei Darussalam.

Commissioned by the then Religious Affairs Department (now the Ministry of Religious Affairs or MORA) as a means of *da'wah* (religious propagation), and with a script written by Dato Paduka Ustaz Awang Haji Abdul Saman bin Kahar, *Gema Dari Menara* was produced in cooperation with Filem Negara Malaysia in 1968 and featured Bruneian and Malaysian actors in the title roles. It would be 45 years before another Bruneian feature film would be produced and screened<sup>1</sup> (Regalblue Productions' *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* in 2013), although some telefilms (films produced for television) were made in the interim period<sup>2</sup> after the establishment of Radio

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<sup>1</sup> In this, the development of the film industry ran parallel with that of the literary arts. The first Bruneian novel, *Mahkota Berdarah* by Yura Halim, was penned in 1951 and followed by the 1952 *Tunangan Pemimpin Bangsa*. This was followed 9 years later by Mohd Salleh Abd. Latif's *Garis Cerah Ufuk Senja* in 1968, followed by another 12-year silence until the same author's *Gegaran Semusim* in 1980.

<sup>2</sup> In an exploratory study of Bruneian film development, Izni Azrein notes that 7 films were made between 1952-1972. Of these 7 films, 6 were documentaries covering cultural, religious and national themes and events such as

Televisyen Brunei in 1975. From 2013-2020, an additional 14 Bruneian films have been made (Liu, 2021: 218), with 4 of these having been screened internationally<sup>3</sup>.

According to Espina, newspaper reports show that the initial premiere of *Gema Dari Menara* in 1968 was sold out, and that subsequent screenings in 1968 and 1969 were well-attended (2013: 66-67). Chin and Liu (2018) note that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary screenings of the film in 2018 were also sold out “through pre-purchased tickets without any promotion effort” (48). At least part of the pleasure and interest in the film both in 1968 and during the screenings in 2014 and 2018 came from the recognition of family and friends (Espina, 2013: 67), especially as several of the actors were at the time or have since become “respected, high ranking officials” (2013:68) and otherwise well-known members of the community<sup>4</sup>.

The film itself is a didactic family drama that has the agenda of addressing the social ills of the day, and in so doing, documents the social milieu of a nation newly grappling with a clash of social values amongst its youth between religion and modernization (Haji Mahmud, 2018: 6). This “clash of social values” is manifested through the three children of Haji Bahar (played by Abu Bakar bin Ahmad) and Che Timah (played by Pengiran Umi binti Pengiran Idrus). Azman (played by Pengiran Haji Abbas bin Pengiran Haji Besar), the dutiful, religious son, represents a way to reconcile modernization with Islamic values and norms; his siblings, Noriah and Nordin (played by Jamaliah Abu and Harun Md Dom respectively), represent the evils of embracing “modern elements” unreservedly. In classic didactic fashion, Noriah and Nordin’s transgressive behaviour, which includes the religiously prohibited practices of drinking, gambling, excessive partying and pre-marital sex, leads to punishment and exile, after which they repent and are accepted back into the family fold.

Despite its status as Brunei’s first feature film, and the generally warm reception of audiences, it can be said that the general public was mostly unaware of *Gema Dari Menara* until its’ rescreening in 2014 and the subsequent efforts by FITREE and the Malay studies programme at UBD to raise its profile. The scriptwriter, Haji Abdul Saman noted in 2018 that the overall reception to the film has been lukewarm – neither critically reviled nor lauded (4). This general indifference to the film has until recently been reflected in academic fields. Perhaps the most well-known and accessible scholarship specifically of *Gema Dari Menara* to date comes from Mervin Espina’s conversation with Ben Slater in a 2013 issue of the Singaporean *Cinematheque Quarterly*, which has been referenced numerous times both in this introduction and in the essays in this special issue. In the interview, which comprises an introductory history to Bruneian cinema in general and to *Gema Dari Menara* in particular, Espina notes that the film “has very little private and public documentation” (2013: 72) and that it was the photocopy of a chapter on Bruneian cinema in *The*

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the coronation of Paduka Seri Begawan, and a visit from the Queen of England. *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was the only non-documentary film made during this period.

<sup>3</sup> While these feature films have been limited in their box office success both domestically and internationally (Liu, 2021: 219), observers and scholars of the Bruneian film industry, including Espina (2013), Izni Azrein (2020) and Liu (2021), have noted the role of digital technologies in Bruneian filmmaking, citing a robust online culture on YouTube and other platforms where short films, music videos, documentaries, comedy skits and other media are circulated and shared.

<sup>4</sup> In a conversation with Harlif Hj Mohamad and Nurain Abdullah in 2018, they anecdotally noted that one of the most popularly recognized individuals during screenings was Pengiran Umi binti Pengiran Idrus, who was a school principal, and played the mother Che Timah, in the film.

*Films of ASEAN* (2000), produced by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, that initially sparked his own interest in this mostly forgotten film. At the end of the conversation, Espina mentions the recent (2013) release of a comedy, *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* as the first Bruneian feature film in a while (74).

Unbeknownst to Espina, Harlif Hj Mohamad and Nurain Abdullah of Regalblue Productions, the production company responsible for *Ada Apa Dengan Rina*, were also at the same time looking more seriously into *Gema Dari Menara*. Harlif had previously heard about the film during his time as a cameraman at Radio Televisyen Brunei, but had mostly forgotten about it until he, with Nurain, began talking to numerous industry veterans on the processes involved in bringing *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* to local cinemas in 2012-2013. During these conversations, *Gema Dari Menara* was mentioned repeatedly, but there was always some confusion about its status and existence, including whether it had previously been banned from being aired on TV. It was these conversations, as well as doing the press circuit for *Ada Apa Dengan Rina*, which Harlif and Nurain suspected was erroneously being called Brunei's first feature film, which motivated them to find out more about *Gema Dari Menara*. In November 2013, *Ada Apa Dengan Rina* was invited to a film festival in Mindanao, and it was there that Harlif and Nurain met Espina. One thing led to another, and in 2014 it became FITREE's goal, headed by Harlif as President, to clear the confusion surrounding *Gema Dari Menara*, and return it to the screen and to the annals of Brunei's film history. On 19 October 2014, after communications with the Ministry of Home Affairs, the then chairman of RTB, and reaching out through their networks to anyone who might have been involved with the film in 1968, *Gema Dari Menara* was successfully screened at The Core, UBD.

Since then, there has been renewed interest in the film amongst the general public and scholars. Espina (2013), Harlif and Nurain (2018, personal communications) and Liu (2021) refer to the film as a "time capsule" of Bruneian culture and pop history, and indeed the film provides a rare and therefore revelatory glimpse at the sights and sounds of 1960s Brunei, from dress to language to ideology, and including the on-screen shots of the then-prevalent, religiously prohibited practices of cock-fighting, alcohol consumption and gambling, amongst others. Apart from the social aspect, the physical landscape also offers a valuable cinematic perspective of iconic landmarks and spaces such as the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin mosque, Kampung Ayer, the capital city, oil fields, highways and what Chin and Liu (2018) call the "traditional kampong landscape" (40). The significance of this film is manifold – it is an important piece of cultural history, and offers many insights into a pre-independence period during which a visible and widespread negotiation between the changes wrought by technology and globalization and a desire to propagate cultural and religious values is ongoing.

This special issue, which brings together the first collection of critical essays on *Gema Dari Menara*, amply demonstrates the significance of this film for any scholars of Bruneian history, culture, media and identity. The essays in this collection range from discussions of national identity construction and popular culture, to a comparative study of language use via signs in the film to the present-day, to an evaluation of the construction of religious prohibitions, and the use of modern technologies in the film, amongst others. While this collection in no way constitutes comprehensive scholarship of the film, it is hoped that it opens up conversations for further study and research on a film whose significance continues to be relevant today.

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