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IF Datuk Rosnani Jamil had taken the brickbats thrown at her, she'd never have thrown all her heart into acting.

She had enough self-belief to not only disregard critics disparaging everything from her looks to her talent, but she also went on to chart a career in showbusiness that spanned six decades.

Known fondly as Mak Nani, the actress has also distinguished herself as a pioneering woman director.

The secret, she says, is for women to believe in their talents and strive for greater things.

"Women have to be firm. Believe in yourself and think positive. You've got to have the fighting spirit to climb the ladder," says Datuk Rosnani who was also a scriptwriter and voice-over talent.

Her earliest test was when she was mocked for being plain and called an ugly duckling.

Instead of being disheartened, the feisty lady took it all in her stride.

"Over the years, I've met people with different characters. Some actresses have called me 'si hitam' (black girl) and many actors have compared my looks to beautiful actresses like Maria Menado and Kasma Booty. Despite brickbats, it's always a better option to remain calm and carry on," says Rosnani.

But even after she has proven her mettle in the local showbiz scene, Rosnani found herself subjected to doubts and scorn when she took on directing in the 1980s.

Back then, homegrown female film directors were far and few in between, as women were perceived to lack the abilities for the director's chair.

"People didn't respect my capabilities as me as a director. There was a lot of discrimination and skepticism," recalls Rosnani, who made her debut as a director in her 1987 movie, *Mawar Merah*. She also wrote the screenplay.

The romantic film had all the right elements – good actors, script and soundtrack – and won a string of awards at the 7th Malaysian Film Festival including Best Actor, Best Budding Actress and Best Script and Original Story.

Despite the accolades, critics still questioned Rosnani's directing prowess. Some commented that her late husband, film director Datuk Jamil Sulong, had directed the film and she had taken credit for it.

"Don't worry too much about criticism. The secret to my success is confidence and being steadfast in my career choices," she says.

A year after *Mawar Merah's* release, she tasted sweet success again after *Tuah* – the 1988 period-drama film which she produced – was screened at the 1990 Montreal



Rosnani has shared her experiences and lessons in her autobiography, which was released in celebration of her 83rd birthday. — AZLINA ABDULLAH/The Star

Pushing the boundaries

Veteran actress/film director Datuk Rosnani Jamil was always ahead of the times.

Film Festival in Montreal, Canada.

"I am proud that a Malaysian film, produced by a woman, was featured at the prestigious film festival. At the event, I met many female directors and scriptwriters who acknowledged my achievements. Being able to gain recognition from other fellow women was the icing on the cake," says Rosnani, adding *Tuah* was directed by her son, Anwardi Jamil Sulong.

Rosnani's success paved the way for more female directors and talented women filmmakers who have gone on to put Malaysia on the world map.

In 1997, Datin Paduka Shuhaimi Baba clinched Best Foreign Film for *Layar Lara* at the Brussels International Independent Film Festival in Belgium.

In 2000, Erma Fatima made the country proud by clinching the Best Director Award at the 7th Pyongyang International Film Festival in North Korea for her film *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*.

"It is important to make full use of life to ensure you have a legacy that people can remember you by," says Rosnani who released her autobiography, *Dato Rosnani Jamil: Dari Sungai Geringging Ke Kota London* in celebration of her 83rd birthday last month.

Rags to riches

Rosnani was born in Sumatera, Indonesia, in 1936. In 1941, her family fled to Singapore during the Japanese Occupation.

Her family was poor and her mother worked several jobs to feed many mouths.

To help her family make ends



In the early days, Rosnani was told she was plain looking but it didn't dampen her spirits.

meet, Rosnani worked as a waitress and dancer in Happy World Club, Singapore.

Her stroke of luck came when film director Tan Sri L. Krishnan noticed her dancing talent at the club. He then approached her to audition for a role in the 1952 movie, *Lupa Daratan*.

"By God's grace, I was offered the lead female role in the movie, produced by the now defunct Malay Film Productions. I was only 16 years old then. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to rub shoulders alongside popular stars like Siput Sarawak, Kasma Booty and Maria Menado," recalls Rosnani, who is of Pakistani and Minangkabau lineage.

But her journey to success wasn't as smooth as her induction into showbiz. The biggest hurdle

Rosnani had to overcome was the language barrier between her and directors who spoke only English, which meant she was at a loss. In the 1950s, only a handful of Singaporean Malay actresses could speak English fluently and Rosnani was not one of them.

Unfazed, Rosnani enrolled in night school to learn English, even though she had to do it on the sly.

"Back in the 1950s, actresses weren't allowed to be seen in public to protect our image. When my manager found out about my classes, I was reprimanded. But I argued with him until he relented."

The night classes helped Rosnani improve her English proficiency and enabled her to communicate well with directors. It gave the ambitious actress an advantage and she was able to clinch more roles.

Among the notable films that Rosnani has acted in are *Anakku Sazali*, *Nasib Si Labu Labi*, *Suara Kekasih* and *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam II*. She has also acted in TV dramas such as *Bapa Borek*, *Suraya* and *Villa Cinta Daddy*.

All in, Rosnani has acted in about 40 films, making her one of the most prolific actresses in the local film industry.

"To be a cut above the rest, ensure you have education. Sign up for courses and improve your skills. It is also vital for women to have a vision for their future," says Rosnani, who went from being in front of the camera to learning the ropes of TV and radio production after joining Singapore Broadcasting Corporation in the mid 1960s.

In 1967, Rosnani and her family



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moved to Kuala Lumpur where she landed a job as a dubbing coordinator in RTM. She then went on to hone her skills in film editing and script-writing, and doing voice-overs.

Three years later, she won a scholarship to study in London where she completed her diploma studies in TV production and make-up at the Television and Film Academy there. While in London, she also worked as a part-time producer for the BBC radio station.

"Always have a vision for the future. To be a cut above the rest, it is equally important to hone your skills and strive for bigger dreams," says the mother of four.

In 2016, Rosnani retired from showbiz after directing her last movie, *Mawar Putih*. These days, she enjoys spending time with her eight grandchildren and tending to her spacious garden in Janda Baik, Pahang.

Producer and director Datuk Yusof Haslam describes Rosnani as "a woman of substance". He continues to be amazed by her dedication to film.

"Her resilience never fails to surprise me. The younger generation should read her autobiography. It talks about her experiences and struggles, and how she overcame many challenges through sheer grit. Over the years, I've learnt so much from Rosnani and her late husband."

"I've gone full circle in my career. It has been an interesting life, filled with bittersweet memories. In life, it is important to leave behind a legacy of hard work and dedication to empowering women," says Rosnani.



Rosnani's late husband, film director Datuk Jamil Sulong was always supportive of her endeavours.



Rosnani was auditioned by Tan Sri P. Ramlee for her first role in *Lupa Daratan*.



Rosnani had a scholarship to study in London to improve her skills in broadcasting.



It was film director Tan Sri L. Krishnan who spotted Mak Nani's talent. — Photos: Datuk Rosnani Jamil