

# FINDING HIDDEN BEAUTY IN CAPTIVITY

**MALAYSIAN FILMMAKER INDRANI**

**KOPAL'S *THE GAME CHANGER***

**GETS RAVE REVIEWS AT THIS YEAR'S**

**HARLEM INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**

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**W**ith television series like *Oz*, *Prison Break* and *Orange is the New Black*, it seems that an entire genre of film has been built around a fictional world in which crime and punishment are unspoken rites of passage, and a man's worth is measured in the time he has spent behind bars.

But amid the onslaught of television dramas glorifying prisons and the lives of convicts, it's easy to forget that the fundamental message behind penitentiaries is in reality one of social reform.

Taking this to heart, Kuala Lumpur native Indrani Kopal reminds us that hope can be found in the unlikely places with *The Game Changer*, a 17-minute documentary chronicling the story of New York-based choreographer Susan Slotnick and her work with the prisoners of the Woodbourne Correctional Facility.

## A date with dance and destiny

"I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to do, which revolved around the theme of rehabilitation through art. That's how I came across Susan, who runs a unique dance therapy programme, the only one of its kind in North America targeted at male convicts. I remember when I first approached her, she wasn't convinced with the idea. Fortunately, she was kind enough to give me a chance," Indrani says with a laugh.

Conceived and produced by Indrani as part of a thesis project for her Master of Fine Arts degree at Hofstra University in Hempstead, the documentary explores how Slotnick's passion, patience and perseverance changed the lives of six Woodbourne prisoners for the better.



Indrani is the first filmmaker to receive a Fulbright Scholarship



The Figures in Flight Released performers found acceptance in dance



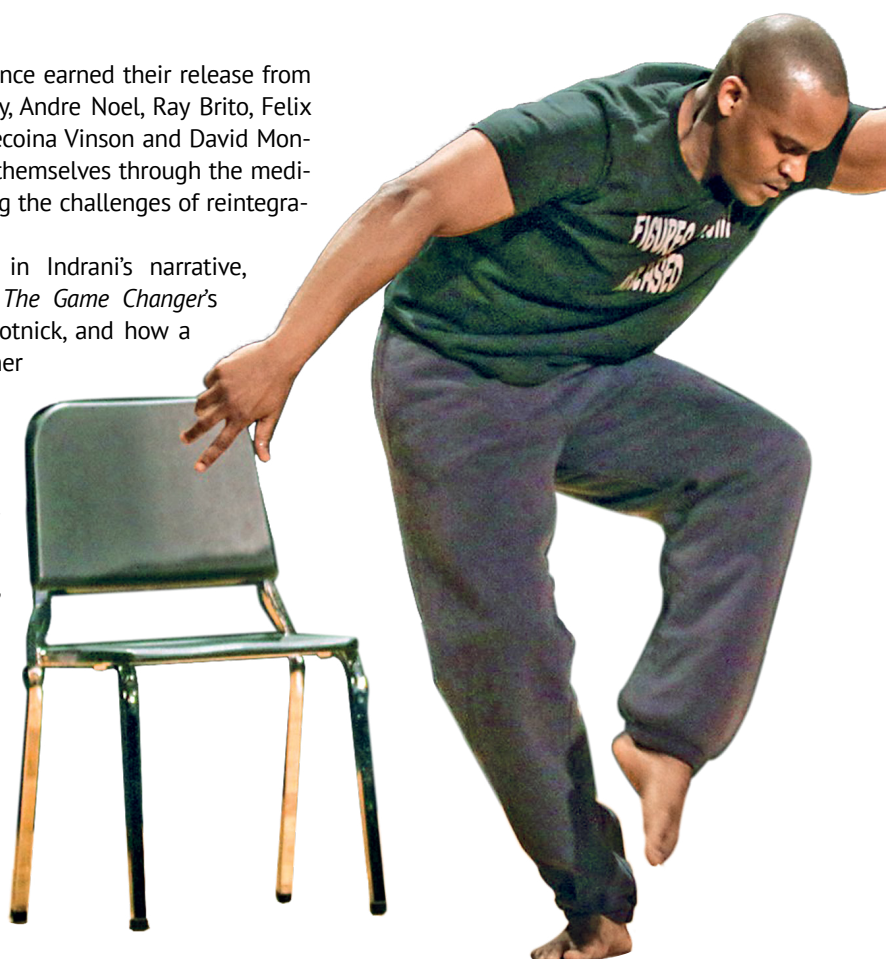
Susan Slotnick's work with the Woodbourne inmates changed their lives

These prisoners have since earned their release from the facility, and to this day, Andre Noel, Ray Brito, Felix Machado, Andrew Kelley, Jecoina Vinson and David Montalvo continue to express themselves through the medium of dance, while juggling the challenges of reintegration into society.

As the central figure in Indrani's narrative, however, the majority of *The Game Changer's* spotlight is focused on Slotnick, and how a wounded childhood led her from failure and alienation in school to her eventual role as a mentor to Noel and his fellow inmates.

Here, the strengths of Indrani's approach to film-making become apparent, as her character-driven narrative forgoes voice-overs entirely in favour of letting her subjects speak for themselves.

"I've done a lot of things with my life. I've painted a lot of pictures, written a lot of articles and I've probably cho-



Indrani honed her craft through exploratory pieces on marginalised groups





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:**  
Figures In Flight  
Released at the Harlem  
International Film  
Festival 2014

Slotnick's dance therapy programme is the only one of its kind aimed at male convicts in North America

Some of the Woodbourne inmates experienced derision for participating in Slotnick's programme



reographed over a thousand dances looking back. But somehow, when I walked into this room in the prison for the first time, I got the overwhelming feeling that everything I've ever done was a step towards that room," says Slotnick.

"Where do you get to see men in their 30s, 40s and 50s dancing with this kind of emotional expression? They're supposed to be the worst people in the world. But when I see them move, it's like looking at something beautiful like watching the sun set or the ocean," she adds.

## Not quite the usual suspects

The six former inmates featured in *The Game Changer* would eventually go on to form the core of their own dance troupe, called Figures in Flight Released (FiFR).

For some, such as Noel, participation in Slotnick's



Figures in Flight  
Released manager  
Andre Noel

programme came as the natural extension of a dance tradition practiced in his native Guyana at both festivals and funerals.

Even then, Noel, who served as Slotnick's assistant choreographer and director, readily admits that the process was far from easy. The driving force behind FiFR as well as its manager, he was often met with derision from other Woodbourne prisoners when heading to dance practice, though like others in the programme, what they found there helped them persevere.

"Though I was incarcerated, when I danced, which could be in any particular room that the programme was assigned for those hours, the environment was transformed by the people within that room into an environment of acceptance, an environment where you could be whoever you wanted to be. That acceptance led to peace," says Brito, a FiFR performer.

Others, like Vinson, joined Slotnick and her dancers specifically to challenge their ideas of what constituted masculinity. In working with the Woodbourne inmates, Slotnick acknowledges the courage it would take for a man to run counter to conventional gender roles under

ideal social circumstances, let alone the harsh conditions of a penitentiary.

*The Game Changer* has gone on to garner extraordinary acclaim for its authenticity and craft, winning Best Short Documentary accolades at the Harlem International Film Festival 2014 and was featured as an official selection in no less than nine festivals around the United States, including the 15th Annual Woodstock Film Festival in Hudson Valley and the Mosaic Film Festival 2014 in Michigan.

## The story behind the story

What is less known is how the documentary was inspired by Indrani's own experiences growing up. Facing self-image issues and alienation due to a medical condition in her childhood, she grew more assertive and expressive after taking up Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance form, at the Tanjai Kamala Indira Dance School in Jalan Ipoh.

"My teacher, Indira Manickam, transformed my life. She was my Susan, and in a very real way, dance healed me. I still remember graduating from the dance school. The ceremony was held at a temple, and just to perform in full gear in front of so many people, that gave me a rush of confidence that I'd never had before in my life," she says.

Even with a background in performance, it would be years before Indrani could translate her experiences into her chosen medium. Starting with on-the-job training in the film labs of the Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology, she discovered her calling as a video journalist at Malaysiakini.com, where she honed her editing and directing skills through explorative pieces on marginalised groups in the country.

It was during this period that Indrani's gifts in documentary production became clear, resulting in a series of award-winning works, including *She's My Son* (2007), *Love in Despair* (2009), and *I Only Dance for You* (2010). The turning point came when Indrani received a Fulbright scholarship in 2012, the first filmmaker to be honoured with the award.

"I made my first short film just for fun and to kill time. And the result was horrible," laughs Indrani. "That was when I realised that I could not make people act. Fiction just wasn't for me. But when you make a documentary, I think that cameras have the power to bring out truths

that nothing else can reveal. Every emotion you're tapping into is true to life."

## A rose by any other name

For the future, Indrani is concentrating on *Incarcerated Rhythms*, a 20-minute piece following the lives of the six former inmates featured in *The Game Changer* as they begin new lives as performers. Slated for release in early 2015, *Incarcerated Rhythms* will also feature interactive elements developed as part of Indrani's final thesis package.



Filming in New York presented Indrani with a number of challenges

As a final note, *The Game Changer's* title was originally inspired by a quote attributed to Brito during filming. While Brito coined the term with Slotnick in mind, it only takes a short chat with Indrani to realise that his words can easily be applied to her as well.

"She comes in to an environment where, honestly, the message is that you're not much, if you're anything at all. And she says, 'No, I think you're the world. I think you're the cream of the crop, and I challenge you to think of yourselves in that fashion, and see what happens. That's why I call her the game changer,'" says Brito.

*The Game Changer* is currently making its rounds on the international film circuit, though its debut on Malaysian shores is yet to be confirmed. ■