



Young Soekarno, the astute orator, holding court

BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS: THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

INDONESIAN DIRECTOR HANUNG BRAMANTYO'S *SOEKARNO* IS AN ELEGANT RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STRUGGLES AND SACRIFICES OF INDONESIA'S FOUNDING FATHER WHILE STAYING TRUE TO THE REALITY OF HIS CHARACTER

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There's an old saying that goes, 'Does man make the times, or do the times make the man?' *Soekarno's* answer to this perennial debate; a little bit of both.

Indonesian actor Ario Bayu's interpretation of the man who would eventually emancipate his nation from colonial interests depicts a charismatic figure at the mercy of forces – both geopolitical and emotional – that are much larger than him.

But it is in adversity that greatness shines through, and well-known Indonesian director Hanung Bramantyo's 2013 biography, opening here this month, shows us the genius with which Soekarno (also known as Sukarno) safely steers his world and the people in it through the currents of personal heartbreak, partisan strife and global conflict against the backdrop of World War II, culminating in the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence in 1945.

"The reason I wanted to make *Soekarno* was because I'd always been very curious about him. Since the 1930s up to the present day, there have been very few films about Soekarno in Indonesia, and I asked myself, 'Why?' He

was our founding father and served as our first president. So, four years ago, I began reviewing the literature on his life before we began producing the movie," says Hanung, speaking at the movie's recent gala premiere in Malaysia.

Underscoring the movie's historical and cultural significance, the event was graced by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Indonesian ambassador to Malaysia Herman Prayitno.

Ario, together with Maudy Koesnaedi, who played Soekarno's second wife Inggit Garnasih, and Tika Bravani, who played Soekarno's third wife Fatmawati, were also on hand to discuss their characters and the movie as a whole.

Controversies and courtships

In terms of chronology, *Soekarno* functions as a biography covering the early years of the eponymous character's life, from his birth in 1901 to aristocratic parents in Surabaya, through his formative years under the Dutch regime, up to his arrest and subsequent 1938 exile in Bencoolen.

The plot, so to speak, thickens with the arrival of Imperial Japanese forces in the Dutch East Indies in 1942,

and the film's thematically appropriate conclusion comes at the halfway point in Soekarno's career, ending the film with Indonesia's independence.

The dearth of prior film tributes to Soekarno is a testament to the challenge in capturing the essence of this controversial character, no less the immeasurable contributions he has made to Indonesian society, history and culture, within a tidy two-hour matinee feature.

As with any personality in politics, he is a polarising force, known as much for his womanising tendencies and association with Marxism as he is for the positive social causes he championed.

Hanung does not shy away from the controversy, addressing Soekarno's communist ties in a pivotal scene early in the movie. "Yes, Mien, I am a Marxist... and a Muslim," Ario's Soekarno tells his childhood sweetheart during a gentle courtship. The scene paints him in a poignant light, more so with the foreknowledge that said courtship was doomed by disapproval from Mien's father – which is amusingly put forth as the genesis of Soekarno's nationalist agenda against the Dutch.

Soekarno's response to Mien also introduces the tension between his political and personal beliefs, and to a large extent his later years can be seen as a struggle to reconcile these two in the context of a practical ideological framework to govern Indonesia's incredibly pluralistic society.

Hanung pulls no punches here either; this dilemma is posed to audiences through a visceral account of Soekarno's assistance in procuring local comfort women for the Japanese forces occupying Indonesia during World War II, as well as his support of the Japanese *romusha* (forced labour) camps in his own homeland.



TOP:
The film's political threads form a complex tapestry

BOTTOM:
Soekarno's iconic white suit combined elements of East and West

A charismatic character

To his credit, Ario never fails to portray Soekarno as anything less than likeable, despite the subject matter, though whether this is a quality inherent in the actor or the figure he represents is a matter of debate. In person, Ario's jovial extroversion is a contrast to the deliberately measured tones of the character he plays, though from his account, this was what drew him to the role.

"He was a great orator and a great leader. Some may see him as a chauvinist, but that's the duality that, for me at least, was very eccentric and interesting. This was a man with amazing ideas, a humanitarian at heart, who tried to bring these two elements together into creating a world where people could live in a more equal and respectful way," he says.

"When I was offered the role, I actually called my dad and asked him if I should take it as I didn't know if I could do it justice. He was like, 'Of course you should take it. You'll even get the chance to learn your history,'" Ario adds with a laugh. "Was I able to adequately capture Soekarno's substance? That's always going to be pretty subjective, but in the end, I have to say that this was my own impression of what he did."

The film certainly benefits from the urbane presence that Ario projects throughout its 137-minute running time,



and it is the strength of his portrayal that allows us to sympathise with him during the morally murky third act.

He presents Soekarno's acts of collaboration under the Japanese occupation as political necessities to serve a greater goal, and in their wake, Ario emotes an impotent anger that hints that the character is as much a victim of circumstance as the untold numbers of countrymen he delivered to brutality and rape.

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COSTUMES AND KEBAYA: RECAPTURING COLONIAL JAKARTA

A large part of *Soekarno*'s appeal is in its faithful recreation of the Dutch East Indies, down to the finest details of dress, language and locales. Accentuating the epoch in which it takes place, the movie's palette is awash in pleasantly nostalgic, desaturated tones, calling to mind authentic vintage photographs of days gone by.

Clothing appropriate to the period abounds, and true to the spirit of Indonesia under colonial rule, a variety of influences are seen in the film's wardrobe. Predominant among these are the traditional kebaya and batik sarong popular at the time among indigenous women as well as those of mixed heritage, with luxury fabrics and soft European colours denoting those of the upper class.

"The clothes worn by Maudy and Tika, as well as the rest of the cast, the kebaya and others, were thankfully simple to source as they're readily found in Java. It was more of a challenge to create the sets we needed in Indonesia, because we don't have large studios like the ones in Hollywood, California, or South Korea. So we actually had to reconstruct Soekarno's house from existing records, along with many of the locations he visited in his life," says Hanung.

"We had a pretty great set designer, which helped us tremendously. Not only does it get you into the right frame of mind, but you also get a sense of the whole thing. We also did some filming on location too where we could, which was awesome," Ario says.

The synthesis of two separate ideologies is a running theme throughout the movie, and is represented in the iconic white suit Ario wears in key scenes. Inspired by Soekarno's own tastes, the suit borrows from European modes of attire while retaining the customs of Soekarno's own upbringing, as seen in the songkok he often affected.

Soekarno was a product of his time and a shaper of the national identity



The movie's wardrobe reflects the kebaya and batik sarong worn by women during this period



CLOCKWISE

FROM TOP:

Soekarno was originally given the name Kusno, but was renamed following a childhood illness

The movie utilised both set and location shooting to capture the mood

Maudy's character is perhaps the most tragic figure in the story

Both Japanese and Dutch army uniforms are faithfully recreated



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A chain of concubines

His support of Japanese comfort women is perhaps harsh in light of Soekarno's reportedly cavalier attitude towards the women in his life. Maudy and Tika turn in blameless performances as his second and third wives respectively, with the former bagging the Best Supporting Actress award at the 2014 Bandung Film Festival (BFF 2014) for her role as Inggit.

"I had the good fortune of being a fan of Inggit prior to acting in the movie. I adored her character and respected the sacrifices that she made. This was my first time working with Ario, and it helped that our relative ages reflected the gap between Soekarno and Inggit as well. I'm really proud to be part of this production, especially as I had the chance to work with Hanung, who's a wonderful director," says Maudy.

Though sadly relegated to the sideline for much of the movie, hers is perhaps the most tragic figure in the story of Soekarno's life. His senior by 13 years, the two became romantically involved during Soekarno's student years, and both divorced their partners to be together. Inggit's devotion to her husband was such that she joined him in exile in Bencoolen, and Hanung depicts her as a constant source of hope for him during that troubled time.

Despite Inggit's loyalty, Soekarno ended their marriage of nearly 20 years and took Fatmawati as his wife in 1943, citing Inggit's inability to give him children as a factor. While this reasoning is taken at face value in the movie, and Ario's interpretation of the character shows a man torn by conflicting passions, the fact that Soekarno remarried six times after Fatmawati bore him two sons and three daughters tend to cast this in a questionable light at best.

Despite its honesty in other areas, the film still came under heavy fire from parties no less august than Rachmawati Soekarnoputri, Soekarno's second daughter by Fatmawati. Amid concerns that the film focused on commercial viability at the expense of history and national character building, she filed a lawsuit against Multivision Plus Pictures, the production house behind the movie.

Soekarno's producer and Multivision Plus Pictures founder Raam Punjabi asks, "Rachmawati's contention was the production implied that our independence came as a gift from the Japanese, without effort on Soekarno's

part. But I think her comments were a little biased considering that she claims she has not seen the movie. So how can anybody make such a judgment without seeing the movie concerned?"

Though the lawsuit was later found to have no basis by a presiding judge at the Central Jakarta District Court, it illustrates the emotional impact that Soekarno continues to have on his people, more than 40 years after his passing. Small wonder then that Hanung's respectful treatment has received the Best Picture and Best Director awards at BFF 2014. ■

(L-R) Amrit Punjabi, Ario Bayu, Tika Bravani, Herman Prayitno, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Maudy Koesnaedi and Hanung Bramantyo

