

Between Russia and Indonesia: The film and cultural wanderings of

Awal Uzhara

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ABSTRACT:

Indonesian movie buffs are certainly familiar with names such as Sjumandjaja, Sukarno M. Noor, Bing Slamet, and their ilk. They were large presences who graced the world of Indonesian cinema and were successful in their time and still are even to this day, with their names and works continually being discussed. However, if we take a slightly more detailed look at history, there is one almost forgotten name, that of Awal Uzhara, who would have been a presence to be reckoned with in Indonesian cinema if he had not been unfortunate enough to be suspected of being connected to the September 30, 1965 putsch (known as the G30S). This study aims to delve into the background and creative processes of Awal Uzhara as film director, actor, and artist. The study used a qualitative approach, and data was garnered through observation, direct interview, and document collation.

Keywords: Indonesian Film, Awal Uzhara, G30S

ABSTRAK:

Para penikmat sinema di Indonesia tentu tidak asing dengan nama-nama seperti Sjumandjaja, Sukarno M. Noor, Bing Slamet dan banyak lagi lainnya. Mereka adalah nama-nama besar yang pernah menghiasi dunia film Indonesia dan berjaya dimasa nya, bahkan hingga saat ini nama dan karyanya masih sering kita perbincangkan. Tetapi, jika kita mau sedikit menilik kembali sejarah secara mendetail, kita semua telah luput pada satu nama yaitu Awal Uzhara, nama yang seharusnya dapat diperhitungkan di jagat sinema Indonesia jika saja nasib buruk terkait peristiwa G30S tidak menyimpannya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui latar belakang Awal Uzhara dan proses pengkaryaan Awal Uzhara sebagai seorang sutradara, aktor maupun pelaku seni. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah dengan pendekatan kualitatif, dan pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan teknik observasi, wawancara dan dokumentasi.

Kata kunci: Film Indonesia, Awal Uzhara, G30S

INTRODUCTION

The annals of Indonesian film history seemed to have skipped a certain movie director named Awal Uzhara. Awal Uzhara hailed from Minangkabau, West Sumatera, and studied at the VGIK, the oldest school of cinematography in Russia. Awal Uzhara was one of three students who obtained a service association scholarship to study film in the Soviet Union alongside Sjumandjaja. Awal Uzhara started his career in film in 1952 as a painter of film posters in Jakarta. (At the time, film posters were painted manually by artists). His job as a poster artist did not last long, because Awal got a job opening at the State Film Company, known as the PFN, as décor painter. This PFN job became Awal Uzhara's gateway to a career in the film industry. While working there, Awal had a unique lucky break. One morning, Awal Uzhara was called by film director Basuki Effendy, and was unexpectedly offered to take part in the production of the film "Pulang" (Going Home) as property master. Unique about the incident was, in the middle of production, Basuki Effendy, again out of the blue, asked Awal to play a bit part as teacher in the movie. Basuki Effendy was the single factor that opened wide the doors for Awal Uzhara's career in cinema, for after "Pulang", Basuki Effendy made another movie, titled "Sampai Berjumpa Pula" (Till We Meet Again), and appointed Awal Uzhara as his assistant director.

These two productions with Basuki Effendy were how Awal Uzhara could attend a Parfi (Indonesian Film Artists Association) conference. After the conference and his involvement in the two Basuki Effendy movies, offers started pouring in from other directors, including Bachtiar Siagian, for the movies "Tjorak Dunia" (Pattern of the World, 1955), "Daerah Hilang" (Lost Region, 1956), and "Melati Sendja" (Jasmine at Dusk, 1956), for Awal's services as assistant director. Awal Uzhara was also assistant director for the films of Alam Surawidjaja and Nawi Ismail.

In 1957, Awal Uzhara was offered to direct his first movie, titled "Hari Libur" (Holiday) by Anom Pictures. The film, which duration was 90 minutes, starred a big name actor of the time, Bing Slamet. "Hari Libur" had its initial screening at the Capitol Theater, in Pasar Baru, Central Jakarta. Unfortunately, Awal Uzhara could not attend the gala opening of his own movie because by that time he had flown to Moscow to begin his studies there. The movie "Hari Libur" is recorded as being hugely successful for the time, even surpassing "War and Peace" directed by King Vidor and starring Mel Ferrer as adapted from the Leo Tolstoy novel.

Scholarship to the Soviet Union

Awal Uzhara's membership in Parfi opened up many opportunities. Besides getting to know numerous people in the industry, Awal Uzhara was selected as one of three people to obtain the service association scholarship to Moscow from the Ministry of Education and Culture. The other two were Sjumandjaja (who later became one of Indonesia's important movie directors), Zubair Lelo, and one other person whose name Awal Uzhara forgets. Awal Uzhara, who at the time had turned 27, left for Moscow on November 3, 1958, to take up studies at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, better simply known as the VGIK (All-State Institute of Cinematography) and hone his skills in the art of cinema.

At the VGIK, Awal Uzhara not only took film, with his other colleagues he studied literature, theater, fine arts, and music. In every end-of-term exam in the first and second years, students were given a film assignment, but also had to create a drama production. This made Awal Uzhara realize that a good movie director needs to master well the skill of acting. On the other hand, a good actor also needs to master film directing. The tutorship from one professor named Gerasimov became his beacon throughout his career in film. At the VGIK, Awal Uzhara also had to study films from all over the world. The students' daily routine was to watch the classic works of such filmmakers as Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), Dziga Vertov (1896-1954), D. W. Griffith (1875-1948), to Vittorio de Sica (1901-1974). After viewing, the films were then dissected in class to discuss their technical and narrative elements. The movies "Battleship Potemkin" (1925) by Eisenstein, and "Bicycle Thieves" by de Sica were two works which greatly impacted Awal Uzhara at the time. At the VGIK campus, Awal Uzhara came to know the Stanilawskian method, which held to the principle of inner action. It was there, too, that Awal Uzhara was given assignments to make short films and silent movies. One of the assignments that impressed him greatly was a film narrating the story of the life of coolies. The film was critiqued and given input by Gerasimov's wife, Tamara Makarova, herself an actress and professor teaching the importance of showcasing one's actors through their "inner appearance" and not only their "outward" one.

Awal Uzhara completed his studies at the VGIK with a film titled "Tembakan" (Shooting) adapted from a work by Alexander Sergeyeovich Pushkin (1799-1837). "Tembakan" impressed Gerasimov so much, he introduced Awal Uzhara to his idol, film director Sergei Bondarchuk (1920-1944).

Post G30S Troubles

Awal Uzhara stayed at the VGIK for eight years, because he took the graduate course and returned to Indonesia with a Masters degree. In 1996 Awal Uzhara decided to go back home.

In Indonesia, Awal Uzhara's homecoming had a cool reception, and instead he was bombarded by government questioning, being suspected of involvement in the September 30, 1965 Movement, dubbed in Indonesia as the G30S, and looked upon as identifiable with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Indeed, it was par for the course for anyone returning from the Soviet Union and other Communist countries to be looked upon with excessive suspicion, fearing their allegiance towards Communism, a doctrine being abolished in Indonesia. Luckily for Awal Uzhara, he managed to pass through the barrage of government questioning and pocketed a letter declaring himself free from involvement in the G30S event. It turned out, the stiff screening process he managed to get through was only his first tough obstacle. His next big test was looking for work. The first person he approached was Sjumandjaja, his colleague in the Soviet Union who had returned several years earlier. The meeting with Sjumandjaja is ingrained in Awal Uzhara's mind, because Sjumandjaja gave him no satisfactory answer, instead only shook his head while saying there was no work for him while not even looking Awal Uzhara in the face.

The many rebuttals from all sides put Awal Uzhara in a precarious situation. In that period, he received news that his infant in the Soviet Union was very ill and had become paralyzed. Before finishing his studies at the VGIK, Awal Uzhara had married his Russian sweetheart, and the couple was blessed with two children. He returned by himself to Indonesia to find work, and the plan was to then bring his family over. Fate decided otherwise. After getting the bad news about his child, who at the time was only 1,5 years old, Awal Uzhara decided to go back to his family in the Soviet Union. Yet, this too was problematic. Once more he was at a loose end. He tried to meet the then Indonesian ambassador to the Soviet Union, Manai Sophian, who instead told him to meet the military commander. The military commander told Awal Uzhara to hightail it back to Indonesia and did not permit him to stay long in the Soviet. Awal Uzhara was in a quandary. On the one hand, his child was deathly sick. On the other hand, he was not allowed to stay long in the Soviet Union. Then one day he got a telephone call from Gerasimov, who asked him to come back to the VGIK and be assistant professor. Without further ado, Awal Uzhara jumped at the

chance. Not long after his decision to work at the VGIK, Awal Uzhara received word from Zubair Lelo that their citizenship had been rescinded. This caused Awal Uzhara to end up residing in the Soviet Union, which eventually became Russia, in the position of a man with no country. He was a stateless citizen.

Life and New Work in Moscow

Since his return to Moscow in 1967, and after being saved by Professor Gerasimov from a life of uncertainty, Awal Uzhara got busy assisting his professor teaching new undergraduates. He was tasked by Gerasimov to oversee students preparing their drama or film assignments. Though assisting Gerasimov as a teacher, his wish to continue studying film never dissipated. As he assisted Gerasimov teaching film directing, Awal Uzhara took up studies in camera. To his view, studying camerawork is of utmost importance, because even film directors need to understand the workings of a camera more than they need to understand directing.

Once he started delving into the camera, Awal Uzhara became a productive filmmaker. His film productions include “On Tashkent Film Festival” (a documentary on the film festival in Tashkent), “Our School in Moscow” which tells the story of children of Arabic descent living in Moscow, the film “Exhibition” depicting the many folk art forms of Indonesia, and the film “Tapol” which tells the story of Indonesian political prisoners exiled to the island of Buru, including in it the stories of Basuki Effendy and Pramoedya Ananta Toer through narration read by Awal Uzhara himself. Awal Uzhara recorded his narration for “Tapol” as he sobbed, recalling the many favors Basuki Effendy gave him, his leg up into the world of film. “Tapol” was screened in Moscow in 1977 and won an award. The period he returned to Moscow was Awal Uzhara’s golden years of productivity. Though, as he personally related to this writer, the films he produced were few, and his career as director was nothing extraordinary. Yet, his big desire was to create something for Indonesia, and that is exactly what Awal Uzhara did in the 50 years he was a resident of Moscow. He introduced Indonesian culture to audiences by becoming a professor at the Moscow State University, in the faculty of the Institute of Asian-African Countries (ISAA) which studies the economies, histories and languages of the Asian and African nations. Awal Uzhara replaced the role priorly held by writer Utuy Tatang Sontany as Native Speaker. Awal Uzhara spent his days in Moscow introducing the many cultural forms of Indonesia through the medium of art,

including film, until 2004, when Awal Uzhara met Susi Machdalena, who became his wife and succeeded in bringing Awal Uzhara home to Indonesia on April 21, 2012.

CONCLUSION

This is the long and knotty story of the life and times of one Awal Uzhara, arduous and tiring for himself but an important bit of history for us, the reader. How can it not be so? In the world of cinema, Awal Uzhara lived and worked in three different periods of the film industry, from when film was black and white and analogue, to the cinema of today with everything digital. Awal Uzhara's life gives us insight on how the Indonesian State, with the advent of the G30S putsch, betrayed its very own ideology as written in the Pancasila State principles: "A Just and Civilized Humanism", and "Social Justice for All Indonesian Citizens". The writer wishes to posit these principles were never enjoyed by Awal Uzhara. When reading about Awal Uzhara's life, we also see how very much he loved his country, while he now approaches the end of his days, such loyalty and love – proven by his actions introducing Indonesian culture to the people of Russia through his students on campus -- has never been shown appreciation by the State. The ties between Indonesia and Russia are solid and close-knit, and one could posit that Awal Uzhara had a contribution in it. If at the time, no discrimination had been levelled towards graduates returning home after studying in countries adhering to Communist ideology, it could be that today the name of Awal Uzhara would have been much written about in books on the history of Indonesian cinema, and he would be there standing on par with the greats of Indonesian film.

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