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L. Krishnan - magic of golden oldies

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DATUK L. Krishnan is known for a number of things. For a start, he used to make Malay movies starring the inimitable P. Ramlee. That was, of course, years and years ago.

Today, he is better known for his devotion to charitable causes and, not without some amusement on his part, for his resemblance to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

More than a few visitors to his Gaya Filem office must have wondered about the prominently-hung portrait of Dr Mahathir before realising that the portrait is actually of Krishnan, painted by an unknown Balinese artist.

In fact, Krishnan was attired in a rather "Mahathirish" suit that afternoon, the polished version of the bush jacket. And it takes some effort to imagine this soft-spoken and genial gentleman as the one and same Lakshmanan Krishnan who directed a total of 33 Malay movies, several of which were box-office hits; who glided in the same orbit as some of the most glittering stars of the early Malay movie galaxy and who counted names like P. Ramlee, Siput Sarawak and Roomai Noor as close friends.

Krishnan's links with the world of films today are a more mundane but definitely more materially rewarding. He owns one of those high-tech film-processing labs used by local and even Indonesian film-makers. And once a year, he is invited to judge the annual Malaysian Film Festival.

But quite incredibly, the man who used to live and breathe films has lost all interest in Malay movies (whether in making or viewing them). He rarely visits the cinema except to see films with outstanding special effects.

His explanation: "Films today limit the audience. They are made for the young or they're too Malay or too Chinese. That's the failure of local films today."

When Krishnan set up Gaya Filem in 1971, he was also making a clean break from movie-making, or they say in today's parlance, re-inventing himself.

By the late 1960s, he had grown somewhat disillusioned with being a salaryman. He was also shrewd enough to sense the changes taking place. Foreign films were snaring an increasing bulk of movie-goers and he could see too that television would soon be a major form of mass entertainment with a market for made-for-TV commercials; the latter did become Gaya Filem's money-spinner.

He also tagged himself four targets: to be No. 1 as a film production house, recording studio, colour laboratory and post-production house. He made three of his four targets although the colour lab is now his sole business interest. The 75-year-old looks every inch the successful businessman he has become or, as some say, a millionaire.

Krishnan's fame as a film director came only after an eventful series of events which seem to suggest that the lives of earlier generations were much more unpredictable and adventurous.

Krishnan was born in India but raised in British Malaya. His parents were part of the migrational stream of Indians who came in search of a better life.

Life was better here but not that much better. But Krishnan was bright and the Japanese Occupation saw him learning Japanese, a skill which opened various doors for him during those chaotic years, among which was

interpreting for the Japanese military in Singapore and Acheh.

But when the Japanese surrendered, the British charged him with collaborating with the Japanese and deported him back to Madras. There he found work, first, with the Indian Congress, then in Madras' thriving film industry.

Around 1947, a film buyer employed by the then fledgling pair of Shaw brothers in Malaya was in India to buy films.

Run Run and Run Me Shaw (among those who managed to prosper during the war) had begun making Malay films at the end of the war.

They got their head start screening Japanese and Indian movies (Chinese films were banned) during the Occupation. They also found that Malay films made by Indian directors were better received than those made by Chinese directors imported from Hong Kong. Thus, they had asked their film buyer to look out for suitable Indian film directors. And that, basically, was how Krishnan came into the picture.

"Culturally, Malays and Indians have much more in common than you think. It was also a case of better the devil you know... I was Indian but I spoke and wrote Malay," he says.

His first picture was Bakti, the movie that launched P. Ramlee as a romantic screen hero. Kasmah Booty was the heroine, Siput Sarawak the perempuan jahat (the femme fatale) and Roomai Noor the villain. The plot was a plagiarised cross between Wuthering Heights and Le Miserables but scripted on the well-tested formula of song-dance-and-drama. The local audience loved it.

He recalls: "Ramlee was then a bit player, rendering his voice for better known actors like Roomai Noor. But in India, all singers become leading actors and actresses no matter how hopeless their acting."

Bakti also torched off Krishnan's reputation as a director. All in all, he used P. Ramlee in four films (the others were Takdir, Penghidupan and Antara Senyum Dan Tangis). Krishnan also gave the talented actor his first opportunity at directing (in fact, Krishnan gave numerous people their first chance at acting and directing) but the student quickly overtook the teacher and it was not without a sense of irony - many years later - that Krishnan accepted the Anugerah P. Ramlee.

It is also a matter of pride for Krishnan that Antara Senyum Dan Tangis, adapted from a Chinese novel, was the first local movie to use an ethnically-mixed cast.

But another more ambitious cross-cultural effort in 1955 with a plot involving a pair of star-crossed Chinese-Malay lovers drew controversial repercussion, possibly for touching on religion and featuring the Malay half of the doomed relationship as a drunkard.

Of the 33 movies he directed, his favourites remain: Raden Mas (about Javanese royalty), Orang Minyak (a tremendous box-office hit because of its mass appeal) and Cinta Gadis Rimba.

It cost only $40,000 to make a movie - thus, anything that grossed $100,000 was a hit. Incidentally, P. Ramlee, big star that he was, was paid a monthly salary of $120 (worth about RM1,200 today) apart from the annual $500 bonus. A director got between $800 and $1,000 (about RM8,000 to RM10,000 today).

Shaw Studios also encouraged actors to take a car loan, a scheme partly aimed at deterring them from straying off to the rival Cathay-Keris Studios.

In the meantime, both Krishnan and P. Ramlee had become good friends; they remained so till the day the actor died.

P. Ramlee was fond of spending evenings at Krishnan's house where the actor would try out ideas and scenes on the director.

Thus, a typical evening with P. Ramlee would find him dancing, singing,

acting out parts, playing percussion on any available surface or simply clowning around.

"He was remarkable, he could visualise scenes in his mind and how it ought to be done," says Krishnan.

The late actor was probably also drawn to the refreshments available at Krishnan's. He enjoyed his drink, something that most people seem to find hard admitting about the actor in these pious times, and he rarely left Krishnan's house until the bottle of brandy broken out for the evening was empty.

To women, he was also like a human magnet for his off-screen personality was little different from that on-screen and, by most accounts, the actor seemed to subscribe to the sci-fi slogan, "resistance is futile".

"In real life, he was just as charming and likeable ... and his antics really made you laugh," says Krishnan.

And how did Krishnan's wife, Rani Rathnasamy, now 72, take the eternal invasion of their home by the celluloid glitterati?

"She got used to it but there were a few whom she did not take so well to," he says.

Krishnan also brushes aside - a little too emphatically and quickly - any notion of the "casting couch" in his time.

"Casting was done openly," he insists but admits that relationships did develop during filming and that "most of them were very nice to me because I was the director".

The late 1940s and 1950s were glamorous and exciting times for the Singapore-based movie world where the stars (and lesser stars) moved in the same circle as wealthy businessmen, politicians and even royalty.

Just as movies are an escape from reality, so was making movies and the movie world seemed cushioned from the Independence movement that had enveloped Malays all over the country.

Malay movies continued with their themes of romance, tragedy, comedy and adventure, and the stars drank, partied and had much talked-about relationships; but scandals were not necessarily bad for those involved for it helped fuel their celebrity status.

That Krishnan must have had an enormously grand time during this period can only be speculated from the rather coy smile he wears when recalling those times. His last directing effort was Jenny, a made-for-TV English film that had a so-so reception.

His world today revolves around charity work, his wife who is in less robust health than him and, of course, his office. Neither of his two grown-up children have any interest in films.

He has walked away from his previous life with seemingly few regrets. His recollections of his film days are tinged with undeniable fondness but there is scant sentimentality as evident in the minuscule number of mementoes - just a few faded photographs kept in a brown envelope.

In fact, nothing in his office today hints of his glamorous past. All he has are the memories.