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Erma makes her mark

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WHEN Erma Fatima decided to direct her first feature film, Jimi Asmara, many pooh-poohed her effort, declaring the production a disaster even before the cameras started rolling.

Then the film was released and though it didn't make millions, Jimi Asmara was well-accepted.

Still the sceptics didn't let up. They argued that the young actress couldn't have possibly directed the film and that her cameraman husband, Badaruddin Azmi, was really the person behind it.

Sure, she's proven herself as an actress, having tackled diverse roles and bagged acting awards for several films including Rozana... Cinta '87 (the film that marked her silver screen debut and for which she was named best supporting actress at the Malaysian Film Festival); Hati Bukan Kristal (best actress at the 9th MFF); and Femina (best actress at the 11th MFF).

But directing... surely that's a different ball game altogether. Well, whether or not the lack of confidence in her ability as a director (and a pretty good one at that) was due to the fact that she's a "mere" woman in a male-dominated field, is anyone's guess.

Erma, however, didn't let such negative attitude bother her. Instead, the 33-year-old continued to produce commendable work, mostly telemovies - Ratu Jamu and Jangan, to name but a few memorable ones.

Three years ago, she directed her second feature, Perempuan Melayu Terakhir, and though it had its flaws, there's no question that it was one of the better films produced in recent years. Indeed, the critics' voices became somewhat muffled.

And last year, Erma could finally hold her head up high when she returned from the 7th Pyongyang Film Festival with the best director award (for Perempuan Melayu Terakhir).

Recently, Erma was given another honour when she was offered the task of directing the first joint production between Finas (National Film Development Corporation) and Filem Negara Malaysia.

At the film launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Erma says she is excited about the RM2 million Embun, which is set in the 1940s, during the Japanese Occupation.

"I was planning to work on another film, Bulan dan Matahari, when I was called for a meeting in Finas. They handed me the script and asked if I could handle it."

Needless to say, Erma didn't waste any time in saying yes, even if it meant shelving her own project for the time being.

"Now I have to make sure that I live up to FNM and Finas' expectations."

Right now, she's in the middle of restructuring the script, together with fellow director Aziz M. Osman, Fatimah Abu Bakar, Sujiah Salleh and Embun's writer, Rohiman Harun, whose work won the second place at the Script-Writing Competition, organised by Finas and the Script-Writers Association of Malaysia (SWAM) in 1998.

Embun, says Erma, is essentially a love story that revolves around the seemingly impossible relationship between a feisty young Malay woman named Embun and a Japanese soldier, Koishi.

"The idea is good but there's room for improvement in terms of dialogue."

She is scheduled to start filming in June but Erma says she still hasn't

found the perfect Embun.

"It's a very interesting role. At a time when a woman's place was supposed to be in the kitchen, Embun was not your typical, demure woman of that era.

The role of Embun is something that Erma Fatima the actress would really love to sink her teeth into but she knows her limits.

"I don't think I could carry the dual role of a director and an actress. At least, not in a film like this. This is a huge responsibility for me and I don't want to screw it up."

Have we seen the last of Erma the actress then?

"Well, I would still love to act. The problem is producers and directors are afraid to take me. I'm one of the faces that 'doesn't sell'.

"But even if there had been offers, none was remotely interesting. I'm not just talking about the roles. Before I accept any role, I'd have to be able to get into the story first. Lately, I haven't come across any that has grabbed my attention."