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Sarimah gets serious in new talk show

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SINGER and TV personality Sarimah Ibrahim was in the middle of hosting Malaysia 2020, a new TV talk show, when her "ear piece" suddenly fell off, cutting her off from the show's producer.

Did she signal the director to stop recording? No. For one, Sarimah loves new challenges. This is also the reason why she agreed to host this "serious" programme, a departure from the more fun children's shows she has been doing.

Besides, her guest was Armed Forces Chief Jen Tan Sri Mohamed Zahidi Zainuddin, who was in the midst of explaining his past contributions towards achieving the country's Vision 2020. So there was no way she was going to interrupt him until he had finished talking.

So what did she do since no one could cue her on what to say?

Calmly, Sarimah played with her curly long hair, flicked it back, and with a straight face, asked Mohamed Zahidi: "Do you like my hair?"

"Tan Sri immediately burst into laughter," she said in an interview later, still playing with her curls. "It was the dodgiest thing I have ever experienced while hosting the show. It was nerve-wracking, but thank God we managed to get through it smoothly. It helped that Tan Sri has a great sense of humour too!"

Sarimah, known for her vivacious personality, charm and beauty, has previously hosted children's show Kids on ntv7. Also an up-and-coming actress, she has starred in several local movies, including Puteri Impian 2 (2000) and Mimpi Moon (1998), where she played a "baddie".

But hosting a talk show with VIP guests, she said, is a new ball game.

"It is scary, intimidating and funny. I made a lot of mistakes in pronouncing tongue-twisting Malay words which I have never encountered in my life," said Sarimah, who is of Irish and Malay parentage, adding that the programme requires her to speak perfect Bahasa Malaysia.

"I am also not the kind of person who can let others talk while I keep quiet - I like to cut in and give my opinion. However, this is not possible for this show and a lot of times, the viewers will actually see me biting my tongue!

"For the show, I was asked to bring out my serious side more. I also obtained the producer's permission to allow me to be myself, which I think is very important."

Produced by 59 Corporation Sdn Bhd, Malaysia 2020 is aimed at enlightening viewers on the roles of the Government and its agencies in making Vision 2020 a success. It also focuses on corporate sectors and non-Governmental organisations as well as personalities who have contributed to the nation's growth.

The one-hour talk show/semi-documentary programme, currently being recorded at Finas Studio in Hulu Kelang, is scheduled to be aired from Mondays to Fridays, beginning May. It is targeted at those between 15 and 35 years.

It is divided into two segments - guest interviews (question-and-answer session between Sarimah and her guests) and documentary (featuring related visuals, clips and footages pertaining to topics discussed by the guests). For the latter, two new hosts - Warren Fernandez and Subir Che Selia - will take over.

Apart from Mohamed Zahidi, Sarimah has so far interviewed Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun

Razak, National Registration Department director-general Datuk Azizan Ayob, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Modenas chief executive officer Datuk Rashid Din.

"What I do is to follow my guests' momentum and go with the flow. If they are serious, I will be quiet and attentive. But if they crack jokes and have a good sense of humour, I will make the show funnier!," she said, adding "some of my guests actually gave me the don't-bug-me look, after which, viewers can actually see me turning sheepish.

"The first thing I will look for is eye contact. If the guests always look away, then I know it won't be fun. Nonetheless, I will try my best to diffuse the situation and make the show lively.

"Viewers will also get to see the different sides of Sarimah - the happy Sarimah, the not-sure-what-to-do Sarimah and the sheepish Sarimah. For the past recordings, it has been mostly the second type."

Sarimah also loves the "don't-take-me-lightly set of the show", featuring the KL skyline at night as the background.

"For future programmes, I will be interviewing personalities who have, in some ways, contributed to the nation and helped realise the vision made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad," said Sarimah, who won the Best Host for Television Programme in last year's Anugerah Bintang Popular, organised by Berita Harian.

59 Corporation's executive chairman Mohd Hassan Abu said Sarimah was chosen as the hostess because she has a "great personality and appeals to a wider audience".

"We conducted a survey and found that the public prefers her to host such shows. She has also won an award which recognises her ability in hosting TV programmes," he said, adding that "we also believe that she has what it takes to make this programme more interesting and successful." Mohd Hassan is also the show's executive producer.

Meanwhile, Sarimah's upcoming movie Janji Diana will be released in the middle of the year. She will soon star in director Yusuf Haslam's latest action-comedy MX3, alongside Faizal Hussein, Azlee Senario, Shanee and Juliana Banos.

"I received the script a few days ago and I was interested in the role of an evil, materialistic woman. The story is about a woman who wants to squeeze money out of her presumably dead husband, who is actually still alive!" she said.