

The 'private' Dr Mahathir

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Director Dr Hatta Azad Khan and actor Azhar Amir tell **Dennis Chua** about the latest cinematic tribute to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, politician and family man



Azhar Amir (right) and Fauziah Latiff. PICTURES BY HALIMATON SAADIAH SULAIMAN



“While his role as a statesman will be highlighted, we want to focus more on the private Dr Mahathir that few of us know.”

Dr Hatta Azad Khan

15 and last two months. Hatta and his co-director Chan Wai Cheong will shoot in several locations in and out of the country, including Langkawi, Alor Star, Kelantan, Penang and Hiroshima in Japan.

He said that producers Datuk Seri Alan Kuang, Datuk Jacky Poh, Dr Lawrence Poh, Taha Wahid, Yusuf Kelana and Anuar Che Embi worked with Chan and himself to develop the script over the last

A DECADE ago, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was honoured with a special musical at Istana Budaya, and he was also portrayed in award-winning director Datin Paduka Shuhaimi Baba's film *Tanda Putera*.

Both the musical and film, however, paid tribute to Dr Mahathir as the country's fourth Prime Minister, as well as his early days in the government of second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

Come July next year, acclaimed filmmaker Dr Hatta Azad Khan will have his labour of love to Dr Mahathir screened in cinemas nationwide and this production, it focuses on the prime minister's remarkable political comeback which took place 15 years after he had completed his first premiership.

Hatta's epic story is *Mahathir: The Journey*, and the man behind the iconic comedy series *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu* describes it as his labour of love to the historical figure he admires most.

"I have always wanted to make a film about Dr Mahathir, and I want to thank my friends Datuk Ahmad Tarmimi Siregar, Datuk Yusof Haslam and Othman Hafsham for inviting me to do so," said Hatta at the launch of his film in Sheraton Petaling Jaya Hotel, in Petaling Jaya recently.

"Rather than make another film about Dr Mahathir's marvellous contributions to Malaysia's industrialisation and modernisation between 1981 and 2003, *Mahathir: The Journey* is the second chapter of his illustrious political life and focuses on his dramatic return to the premiership more than a decade after he called it a day in politics.

"He is a political phenomenon and one of the world's greatest leaders. I am eternally grateful to him for putting Malaysia on the world map and inspiring not only Malays but also all Malaysians to reach for the stars in everything. Dr Mahathir is the master of the *Malaysia Boleh* spirit and always will be."

He also credited Dr Mahathir with setting up the National Film Development Corporation (Finas) and initiating various awards to recognise the contributions of actors and filmmakers.

PRODUCTION SCHEDULING

Filming on *The Journey* will begin on Dec

Prime Minister's 95th birthday on July 10 next year."

Taha said that the film will feature 29 characters well-known in the political scene. "We told the actors that they have to go through the published works, the recordings, the articles and YouTube videos before we start shooting. With the rehearsals, which will last about a week, we can fine-tune all of the characters," he said.

The film produced by Reliance Media Group has a budget of RM6 million.

TITULAR ROLE

Playing the titular role is Azhar Amir, 47, who has acted in a string of popular TV dramas including *Suri Hati Mr Pilot*, *Hero Seorang Cinderella* and *Suami Sebelah Rumah*, since 2014. He has also starred in the Indonesian comedy drama *My Stupid Boss*, Hong Kong action film *Operation Mekong*, and *Pulang*.

This will be his first non-fiction role and he is "wobbly in the knees" about it. "At first, I auditioned for a fictitious Datuk character, and then for Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Eventually Hatta told me to play Dr Mahathir, which made me the happiest man in the world."

Azhar said he did not look the part but he trusted the production crew to give him a good makeover as Shuhaimi did for Rusdi Ramli, who played Abdul Razak in *Tanda Putera*.

"I may not be well-known like Esma Daniel, who truly shone as Dr Mahathir in *Mahathir The Musical*, but I will give the role my best shot since Dr Mahathir is my idol.

"Preparations will be gruelling, since he is one of the key figures in Malaysia's success story. I am glad that Hatta has provided me with lots of tips on how to get into character."

Azhar, who is marking his first non-fiction role on the silver screen, said he hoped to meet Dr Mahathir next month to get his blessings for the role.

"I just want to say hello to Dr Mahathir and ask him about the things that make him tick."

Azhar said it would be impossible for him to impersonate the prime minister 90 per cent. "My aim is to portray Dr Mahathir as close to the man as possible, and bring out his charismatic, dynamic and progressive ways on screen. I want to do justice to a man whom I grew up admiring from afar.

"I love watching biopics and observing how great actors play real-life legends. It is timely to have a story on Dr Mahathir, but the challenge of being him is twice as difficult as that of Rusdi's Abdul Razak in *Tanda Putera*, my favourite local non-fictional portrayal to date."

The other members of the main cast are veteran singer Fauziah Latiff who plays Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, Ning Baizura who plays Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, Afique Husain (as Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir), Datuk Hilal Azman (as Anwar), Dian P. Ramlee (as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail), Lisdawati (as Nurul Izzah Anwar), and Dazrin Kamarudin (as Youth and Sports Minister Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman).

seven months.

"We changed it 12 times, and all along, we checked the facts with the Prime Minister's Office. Dr Mahathir's special officer, Sufi Yusof, personally researched the dialogue and the scenes to ensure that all of the facts were correct."

Hatta revealed that several lesser known scenarios would be highlighted in his film.

"Other than this, we will reveal the events leading to Dr Mahathir's resignation during the 56th Umno General Assembly in 2002; his trip to Japan with Dr Siti Hasmah in the same year; the 2008 election atmosphere; the launch of his memoirs in 2011; his withdrawal from Umno in 2016; the announcement of his candidacy as Prime Minister in 2017; the election campaign in 2018; and his official swearing in as Prime Minister for the second time."

Hatta added: "*Mahathir: The Journey* is an intimate portrait of Dr Mahathir the family man. While his role as a statesman will be highlighted, we want to focus more on the private Dr Mahathir that few of us know. It begins with his retirement as Prime Minister in Oct 31, 2003 and ends with his return to the premiership on May 10, last year."

To prepare for the film, Hatta watched the documentary *M For Malaysia* thrice.

"We plan to have *Mahathir: The Journey* released in cinemas in conjunction with the