

White Rajah: Malaysia's first Hollywood epic film

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The story of James Brooke, the White Rajah, is one worthy of a Hollywood epic film.

A former British soldier sails to Borneo in 1839, where he helps the Sultan of Brunei put down a pirate rebellion and was bequeathed the land of Sarawak as his own private kingdom.

Thus began the reign of the White Rajah, whose dynasty would last three generations across a hundred years.

Brooke himself was knighted by Queen Victoria, and after resisting efforts by the British to colonise Sarawak, he was even put on trial for piracy and murder.

Well, that aforementioned Hollywood epic is actually going to be made, one that has a US\$15mil (RM48mil) budget and a twice Oscar-nominated director attached to the project.

And the best part is, the entire film is going to be filmed in Sarawak.

The prime mover behind White Rajah is Hollywood producer Rob Allyn, founder and CEO of Margate House Films. Allyn wrote White Rajah's original screenplay based on Brooke's diaries and letters, archives of the Brooke Heritage Trust, and the help of Jason Brooke, a British Museum historian and current heir of the Brooke family, who also serves as a technical adviser on the film.

In an interview during the producer's recent visit to Kuala Lumpur, he said that the movie has been fully financed and greenlit.

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http://www1.star2.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/str2_cnwhiterajah_MAIN_cn.jpg

James Brooke

A portrait of James Brook, which is currently displayed at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Photo: Brooke Heritage Trust

Shooting will commence in mid-2018 with director Sergei Bodrov at the helm. Bodrov is best known for *Prisoner Of The Mountains* (1996) and *Mongol* (2007), both of which were nominated for Oscars in the Best Foreign-Language Film category.

The book of Brooke

According to Allyn, he first got the idea to make a movie about James Brooke seven years ago when he came across a coffee table book called *The White Rajahs Of Sarawak* in a Singaporean bookstore.

“It was a fantastic book with beautiful illustrations of all the Sarawak tribes and the exotic locations, and the story was just an incredible romantic adventure,” he recalled.

“So, the first thing I did was get on IMDB (Internet Movie Database) and make sure there wasn’t a movie about it!”

Allyn was initially fascinated by the story of a young man who fled a romantic scandal in England to become a rajah in Sarawak.

“Brooke probably never really fit in the prim and proper world of Victorian England. He was born in Bengal, and had a bit of a wild streak. He spent his whole life escaping – running away from school when he was 12, and later joining the army, where he was badly injured and left for dead on the battlefield in Burma,” Allyn explained.

“He was never really successful at anything, but he had a dream of something different, a wilder and more vivid life. And he found that tropical paradise of his dreams in Sarawak!”

Upon further research, Allyn was also surprised to find out that Brooke was the real life role model for Rudyard Kipling’s short story *A Man Who Would Be King* and Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*.

There had been previous attempts to make a *White Rajah* movie, starting with an attempt by the legendary actor Errol Flynn in 1936.

“Basically, Hollywood’s been trying to make this movie for more than 80 years!” said Allyn, who said the thing that attracted him to Brooke’s story most was its sense of adventure. “For me, it’s one of the last great unfilmed adventure stories. I loved big romantic adventure movies like *The Mission*, *The Last Of The Mohicans*, *Lawrence Of Arabia*. But Hollywood just isn’t making these type of films anymore.”

Another thing Allyn's production has going for it is the fact that he has the help of Jason Brooke, the current heir of the Brooke family.

"I was in London a few years back when I got an e-mail from someone called Jason Brooke representing the Brooke Heritage Trust. It said, 'We hear you're making a movie and we'd like to talk to you about it'.

"My first thought was, 'Uh oh, is it a lawsuit?'" Allyn recalled with a laugh.

Allyn later met Jason in London, where he visited James Brooke's ancestral home and his gravesite. "Jason is the best spirit guide to the world of Brooke you can ever have. He's a historian at the British Museum, and he spent his whole life in this story!" said Allyn.

The Brooke Heritage Trust, a non-profit organisation, serves as technical advisors on the project, and are giving the filmmakers rights to tens of thousands of images to use in the film, said Allyn.

Lights, camera, action ... in Sarawak

It was Jason who convinced Allyn to make the movie in Sarawak. Yes, apparently the idea of making a Sarawak-based film in Sarawak had not occurred to Allyn at first – the producer had initially planned to film in either Indonesia (where he has made several movies before), Singapore or London's Pinewood Studios.

"The thought HAD occurred to me, but I was worried about the logistics. I had been living in that Brooke era in my head for so long that my impression of Sarawak was that of longhouses and jungles!" he said sheepishly. "Then, Jason asked me why I didn't just make the film in Sarawak, and three years ago, he invited me to go there with him."

There, Allyn realised that his initial fears about filming in Sarawak were completely unfounded, and that in fact, it was the perfect place to shoot the movie.

"In most Asian cities, you have to drive through an hour or so of bad traffic to get out of the city to your sets. But Kuching is unusual. I was afraid it would be too underdeveloped to have the things we would need, or too developed to have the historic things we needed. But it's the opposite – Kuching is modern in its core, but drive 15 minutes outside of the city and there's a magnificent natural studio!" he said. "One of the places we're really interested in filming at is the Sarawak Cultural Village, which is a fantastic facility."

White Rajah will be filmed in a combination of Bahasa Malaysia, English, Iban, Bidayuh and other native Sarawak dialects. Allyn said they are also looking into including local actors and non-actors in the cast. "Sergei has a history of using not only local actors in his films, but also non-actors to play the parts. He's had good success in his previous films with that. The role of Brooke's love interest, Fatima, will most certainly be a local star," he said.

White Rajah also has official backing from the Sarawak Government. During a signing ceremony in September 2016, Chief Minister Datuk Amar Abang Johari said: "White Rajah is an initiative by the State Government to promote Sarawak as a natural studio and a result of negotiations between the Brooke Heritage Trust, the film producers and the State Government through Sarawak Tourism Board."

The Film In Malaysia Incentive's 30% cash rebate on Qualifying Malaysian Production Expenditure was also critical in getting the film made in Sarawak.

"This will be two big historic firsts for Malaysian film. It's the first time that the rebate has been used to make a Hollywood movie outside of Peninsular Malaysia," said Allyn.

"And most importantly, it's also the first big Hollywood movie ever made in Malaysia about a story in Malaysian history."

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