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Thank God for people like Liza



THERE are those among us who are *ketinggalan zaman* (not up to date) when it comes to certain things. For example, I had only recently heard of, and watched, a local drama film about sex workers in Kuala Lumpur that was released some 12 years ago.

Titled *Bukak Api*, the film is a Pink Triangle community project that serves as an advocacy tool for sex workers, highlighting the importance of safe sex and HIV/AIDS prevention. It portrays the crude and cruel realities lived by transgenders and women who need to *cari makan* (earn a living) on the grittier side of the city. Who are these people in real life, and where do they come from? Surely they are not just defined by the work they do.

These are people with personal histories and, for as long as they are breath-

ing, have a future ahead of them. While *Bukak Api* may be fictional, that is it written by and for members of this community suggests that the stories within are not very far from reality.

Take the transgender character named Jelita, for example. She came to the city to run away from a world that was closing in on her. Nevermind the insults coming from the neighbourhood children, her own family members were abusive towards her because she was “different”.

They wanted her to become what she was not—a masculine straight man. But this is akin to expecting the Atacama Desert to turn into a rainforest.

Some might say Jelita could have easily prevented the abuse and subsequent separation from her family had she obeyed their wishes and lived as a man. Well, if it were so easy she probably would have opted for it. But it was impossible enough that Jelita, and others like her, see no choice but to run away. They leave their

whole world behind including comfort and protection.

This is the price they have pay to be able to live in their own skin without self-hate.

Bukak Api reminded me of Ana, a transgender hair-dresser who used to work at my neighbourhood salon. With her there was no time to read a magazine while getting my hair done because we always had something to talk about. We had a very nice relationship in a very nice environment. More than half of the salon's staff were transgender folk who reported to the salon owner, Liza.

Liza, married and with children, took Ana and friends under her tutelage. They came with no skills but over time she taught them everything they needed to know, from hair treatments to colouring and basic hair-cuts.

On the eve of Hari Raya a few years ago I waltzed into the salon to get my hair done. Before I left I (stupidly) asked Ana when she planned to *balik kampung* for the holidays. I realised she

had stopped meddling with my hair and was looking at me in the mirror.

I felt like a complete jerk when I realised Ana and the other transgender staff were dressed in their brand new baju kurungs on the eve of Hari Raya with absolutely nowhere to go.

Luckily Ana knew me well enough to know I meant no malice with the question. And luckily she had a great sense of humour. “*Bulu kening mak lawa sangat untuk orang kat kampung,*” she replied with a half-hearted laugh.

Her perfectly trimmed and shaped eyebrows were too fabulous for her village folk.

I was happy to find out later that Ana and friends had spent Hari Raya at Liza's house stuffing themselves with cookies and watching cheesy programmes on television. Thank God for people like Liza.

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