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# Fighting spirit

**Upcoming movie *Bunga Lalang* checks all the boxes as an action drama that guarantees viewers a ring-side seat at a *tomoi* event.**

**N. RAMA LOHAN**

**A**CTION movies practically speak for themselves. Whether it's Bruce Lee giving Chuck Norris a pummelling in *Way Of The Dragon* or John Rambo spraying bullets at the bad guys in any *Rambo* flick, the language of combat is one firmly entrenched in our consciousness.

While all this may come across as senseless violence, there is an intrinsic beauty and elegance in the more primal form of martial arts that is *tomoi*. In fact, director for the upcoming Malaysian movie *Bunga Lalang* (Wild Flowers), Dain Iskandar Said, reckons that it's artistic enough to be dubbed "sexy" even. Welcome to the world of kickboxing, east coast-style.

The origin of the sport, of course, invariably leads up north to Thailand, where the sport is popularly known as *Muay Thai*. Malaysian practitioners from the east coast and north of the Malaysian peninsula (Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis), however, refer to it as *tomoi*.

*Bunga Lalang* may not even be close to its post-production stages but the film has already attracted the attention of Australian movie distribution company Arclight Films. In fact, according to Dain, the team just completed the technical recce on the film that's taken him two years to realise.

"That's the process when we lock down the locations, work out the number of personnel we're going to need, the length of cables required for the cameras ... among other things," shared Dain during an interview in Kuala Lumpur last week about the process which, to the layman, can be summed up as logistics.

Though quite a bit of the shooting involves capturing scenes in the swamplands of the east coast, Dain, his producer Nandita Solomon and the team are familiar with the terrain since they've done filming there previously.

While the central theme of the movie is on kickboxing, according to Dain, the movie is more about the relationships between the male species.

"It's set around the idea of relationships between brothers, half-brothers, friends, fathers, sons and all this revolves around kickboxing and violence. When I say violence,

I don't mean it as a judgemental thing, though. Violence is part and parcel of emotion ... love, tenderness."

It's also part of the fibre of every culture since time immemorial.

Like any art that's often a vehicle for human expression, *tomoi* is no different and Dain likened it to an unspoken language. "It's like the song by Van Morrison – *Inarticulate Speech Of The Heart*. Some people speak, some people express themselves through their bodies. Kickboxing is kind of a dialogue in

relationships, I guess," revealed Dain, who majored in photography, film and video at Harrow College, Polytechnic Of Central London (now Westminster University).

## Primal sport

Most martial arts and boxing capture their proponents' stance as one of defence, first and foremost. In *tomoi*, though, a fighter strikes a pose almost that of a fowl poised for the attack.

"It's like a cockfight, where the fighter spreads his *sayap* (wings), ready to attack. In fact, back in the day in the *kampung*, they would have cockfights first to rally the crowd for the main event," Dain explained of the primal sport.

Having grown up in Tumpat, Kelantan (he also lived in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, before the family moved around the world with his diplomat father), *tomoi* and related arts of the region are naturally close to his heart.

*Bunga Lalang* isn't just another homogenous take on martial arts movies. It bears little resemblance to its slick Hong Kong or Taiwan counterparts, which vaunt gravity-defying leaps and near-supernatural abilities. *Bunga Lalang* is as real as it gets.

"It's very gritty and raw and really captures the environment at a *tomoi* event. Believe it or not, the women at these fights will be screaming and cheering ... more than the men," revealed the well-travelled Dain, who scoured the cinemas in his teens in the 1970s and knew since he was 15 that he was going to be making

movies.

Fight movies have always captured the imagination of the viewing public and *Bunga Lalang* isn't expected to buck the trend. "I see this as contained violence, and it's

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something you'll find in any culture. Ultimately, it's a form of expression, a characteristic of a particular culture. There's always music and rhythm to the fighter's movements. In many cultures, taking part in martial arts is sort of a rite of passage ... and it provides a sense of community."

In some kampungs, a sport like football provides a communal environment, and in others, it's some form of martial arts. "Today, the kids are all caught up with Facebook and Twitter," Dain noted.

### Family ties

*Bunga Lalang* – which is produced by Dain's own company Apparatus, with support from Bank Simpanan Nasional's creative financial arm Dana Industri Kreatif – revolves around the love lost between three estranged brothers and their father, an ailing *wayang kulit dalang* (shadow play master).

Adil the kickboxer, Ilham the assassin and Bakar the businessman return to their hometown, only to unearth tragic secrets from the past. For them, home is where the broken heart is.

"The characters are prototype in nature. They go in different directions but share the same intensity in what they want," he explained when queried whether the brothers represent any of society's stereotypes.

The action drama stars award-winning actors Faizal Hussein, Hasnul Rahmat (of *Rock* fame) and Zahiril Adzim (who appeared in *Kami*), all of whom will be supported by the likes of Nam Ron, Bront Palarae, Sofi Jikan and Wan Hanafi Su. "I wanted character actors. Some of them come from theatre backgrounds and some from movie," Dain said of his cast.

While the movie is fictional, some of the characters portrayed are based on real people.

"The assassin in the movie is based on a guy whom I met while working on a documentary on AIDS. He was a Kelantanese hired gun," he informed.

Research for the movie came courtesy of the conventional channels of information – books and the Internet, but producer Nandita name-checked one truly rich source.

"Professor Dr Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof is a real treasure for the country. He's like the

foremost expert on Malaysian arts and he passed us quite a few books to read," she chipped in about the adjunct professor at the Cultural Centre, Universiti Malaya, during the interview.

The research process for the movie didn't necessarily arm Dain with any myths, nor did it smash any, but both director and producer learned some important lessons on life.

"People in Kelantan have a certain wisdom which we have lost out on," Nandita opined poignantly.

### Highly inspired

Having done *Dukun* (the yet-unreleased movie about singer/black magician Mona Fandey, who was convicted of murdering Batu Talam (Pahang) assemblyman Datuk Mazlan Idris in 1993) in 2006, Dain was able to apply what he learned from that project in *Bunga Lalang*.

"I've learned to work efficiently within a given time frame. With *Dukun*, I was a director for hire and my job was to turn a script into a screenplay. Following that project, I realised with *Bunga Lalang* that I needed to work again with some of the same actors," he said, singling out Faizal Hussein, Bront Palarae, Sofi Jikan and Nam Ron as repeat performers.

There's still a way to go yet for *Bunga Lalang* to be fully realised but both director and producer are buzzing with enthusiasm, likewise the movie world. And Arclight Films' interest in the movie has only spurred the duo to work harder for their craft.

"I'm lucky I have a producer who's highly efficient. The interest in the movie to us isn't so much about flattery but more about inspiring us to do better. To our knowledge, no movie has drawn this kind of attention at this stage in the production, and we have our friend and producer Tim Kwok to thank for this," said Dain, giving credit where it's due.

*Bunga Lalang* promises to immerse viewers in the real-world setting of tomoi. There's guts and there's plenty of glory, too. "My aim is to capture the energy and heat of a fight on film."

That's a promise the initiated can truly hang on to.

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Director Dain Iskandar Said (right) shares a light moment with Zahiril Adzim after the actor's training session.

**Rigorous:** The actors for *Bunga Lalang* being put through intensive training for their roles in the *tomoi* movie.

