

INTERVIEW: CHRISTINE HAKIM

KUHU TANVIR

Time magazine called her an Asian Hero, noted that she was the first Indonesian actress to be on a jury at the Cannes Film Festival, and then seemed almost to congratulate her on sharing that jury space with the likes of Sharon Stone, Michelle Yeoh and 'other Hollywood glitterati'. Indonesian star Christine Hakim is not perturbed by this Hollywood-centric outlook, her focus is far more on the development of film-craft in Asia. While she was in New Delhi for the Osian's Cinefan Film Festival, she spoke to *Wide Screen* about Asian cinema, young directors, working women and other things that occupy this Asian Hero.

Kuhu Tanvir (KT): Much is said about the usefulness of film festivals, the same questions are asked and the roughly the same answers are given, but we are still to discuss the importance of showcasing Asian cinema. Do you think it helps to create this separate category? Is the special treatment justified?



Figure 1 Christine Hakim (Pic courtesy Osian's Connoisseurs of Art

Christine Hakim (CH): Yes, I think the separation helps, because film culture comes from the West, and while we have made great developments, we are still learning the film language. A large part of us is still to learn that there is a difference between telling a story and making a film, a difference of language, of approach. It has to be more cinematic. In certain parts of Asia some filmmakers have mastered the craft. Directors like Ozu, Kurosawa, can compete in terms of film-craft. But on an average, young filmmakers still need to learn. And we have to move beyond imitating the West and their films. We need to know who we are and gain confidence in that. For this, it is necessary to understand the cultural as well as cinematic commonalities among Asian countries, and this is facilitated by specialised film festivals.

KT: You've been in the film world for decades now, what according to you is the most encouraging development in films in the recent past?

CH: There is an emergence of very strong women characters that I've noticed in the recent past. And why not, society is changing and we are now able to see the positive and the negative side of women and show them in our films. It is less black and white. And more importantly, women are becoming more aware, more careful about how to portray themselves. I think that is healthier than the kind of competition between men and women that some people promote. I've never understood why this competition should be there. The most important thing is to respect oneself. I love to cook and take care of my family, but never as anyone's slave. I know where to draw the line and I do.

KT: And what is the situation of actresses in Indonesia? Here in India it is a strange situation, there are hardly any popular films with central (and certainly not strong)

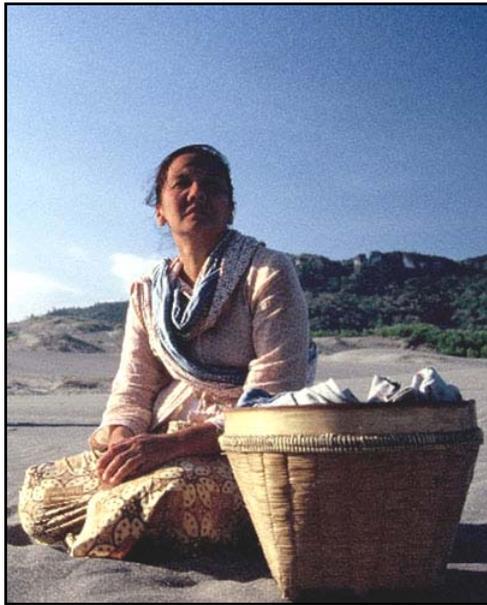


Figure 2 Christine Hakim in Pasir Berbisik (2000)

women characters. And while actresses make the product more marketable, they are in most cases, still paid less than their male counterparts. Is the situation similar in Indonesia?

CH: No, no, not at all. In Indonesia, women always get better roles than men. In every kind of film. I don't know, maybe it is because films with women in them become more popular! In fact, actresses in general are more popular. And as a result they are even paid better.

KT: The Indonesian film industry went through a very rough patch, the only information we have is statistics available on the Internet. What exactly happened and more importantly why?

CH: Lots of things happened, things that had been growing for a while. For starters, TV. Before 1985, we had only one channel on television. Slowly, the number grew to five and they were all commercial channels, and people were getting hooked on to them. Alongside, the popularity of American films was growing. And soon they began to dominate the scene. The reason, according to me, was the appeal of television and the American films for the younger generation that was bored with our existing films. They only wanted to watch drama and comedy and horror, which was entertaining and American films had this in plenty. As a result no one wanted to make films. And certainly not serious films because they were bound to flop. As the industry sank, even the Indonesian Film Festival stopped. There was no industry, so there was no point of the festival. Garin Nugroho (*Opera Jawa, Leaf on a Pillow*) was among the few people who were making films in the time of the industry crash.

KT: And that is also the time you moved on and became a producer?

CH: Yes, *Daun Di Atas Bantal* (English Title: *Leaf on a Pillow*) was my first film as a producer. The decision to become a producer was tough, because I'm not a business-woman, but it had to be done. For many reasons, firstly, because of the crash, there were no good films being made, and I couldn't wait forever for good scripts to come my way. I love being in films, and I know I can't do anything else as well because this

is where my heart is. My aim with this move was also to give a chance to young, serious filmmakers. I wanted to support them and give them a platform, because we needed young filmmakers with a vision. That was the only way the industry would get out of the crash and reinvent itself.

The funny thing is that though I had decided to produce this project because I believed it would be a good film, I didn't want to act in it. We had finalised everything, and me playing the role of Asih was a last minute decision because distributors in Japan (where I had acted during the crash) told me that they would be able to



Figure 3 Christine Hakim in *Di Balik Kelabu* (1983)

sell the film much better if I acted in it because I was a familiar face there. I really didn't want to act in my first film as producer, it was too much pressure!

KT: With the industry crash to discourage you, how did you decide to make a film like *Leaf on a Pillow*? Its dramatic elements are minimal and have no comedy, basically nothing that was appealing to the crowd at that time.

CH: Amidst the 50 years of independence celebrations in Indonesia, a documentary film was made called *The Story of Kanchil*. It was the story of these street children and their lives. When I saw the film, I was shocked, shocked as an Indonesian. I really felt like I had been slapped. And I started obsessing about the situation and what I could do about it. I realised that I had been acting for so long, and it was time to do something for others, something that would have a larger meaning, not just for myself but for people. I know that my circumstances allow me to live safely and comfortably, but that comfort is gone when the situation and suffering of others hits you in the face like that.

The Story of Kanchil had been banned in our country. I felt it was important that the film reaches people and they get to see the reality. Independence is a great thing, but we have to come to terms with our failures as well. And I knew that if we go ahead with the documentary form, we'll get banned again. I've been in the industry for long enough to know the ways of evading censorship. Besides, it has to be a film that spoke to people, that communicated. I told Garin (Nugroho) that he had to combine his strengths as a documentary filmmaker and as a feature filmmaker for this project. In other words, it had to be true and powerful but also stylish and poetic.

KT: Was it difficult to switch from being an actress to being a producer and an actress?

CH: Yes, it was very difficult. It is still difficult. But I know my goal and I know that the challenge is to be consistent. You just have to go through, you have to reach the

finish line, and you have to be committed. The most difficult thing is to make sure that the 100 people you are working with have the same goal and commitment.

KT: Let's talk a bit about the children in *Leaf on a Pillow*. Mira Nair once made a film called *Salaam Bombay*. It is very similar to your film in many ways, especially in that actual street children act in the film. And that film too had a huge impact, the boy became a star overnight and his life changed. To cut a long story short, let's just say the children in that film went through a serious identity crisis. What happened to the children in your film? What are they up to now?

CH: I was very very aware of this problem or the possibility of this problem even before we started making the film. Because fame is such a strange thing, it can change everything. We made sure that under no circumstances would we just use the children, pay them and then forget about them. I was determined to follow up as much as possible after the film was over, to ascertain that their lives were taken care of. I wanted that those children should go to school, but some were too old to start and school studies didn't necessarily suit them considering the way they had grown up. For instance, Heru was interested in music, and we put him in a small music school and kept a check on him. I've been to see him there a few times and he is doing well.

KT: You've been an actress and also a producer...any plans on directing a film?

CH: I am not that ambitious about directing. But there is a story that I've been thinking about for a while and maybe someday I'll do something about it, but not until I find the perfect actress for it. She has to be very strong and have great emotional depth and experience. I don't want someone who screams and cries on screen to convey everything. That's very easy. Crying is the easiest thing to do, I mean, all you need is an onion. But it doesn't really convey actual meaning. Only when you are able to convey the inner violence and power of an emotion have you achieved something. You have to scrape beneath the tears and the screams. What is it based on, where is the feeling coming from and why. Only a person who can understand this can work in my film.

About Interviewer: Kuhu Tanvir is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. She currently works as a film critic for *NDTVMovies.com*, an Indian cinema website. Kuhu has an M.A in English Literature from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. She has previously worked for The First City Theatre Foundation and worked on the Festival Bulletin at the 9th Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema. Her areas of interest include realism, fantasy and portrayals of the Holocaust in cinema.