

An interview with Azharr Rudin, director of This Longing

David Walsh
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We commented on This Longing, directed by Malaysian filmmaker Azharr Rudin, in Part 1 of the series on the Vancouver film festival. The drama about working class characters takes place in a decaying high-rise apartment building in Johor Baharu, in southern Malaysia, within walking distance of Singapore.

Subsequently, Rudin was kind enough to agree to an interview by e-mail. These are the questions and answers.

David Walsh: What was the origin of the idea for the film? In autobiography, in observation...?



Azharr Rudin

Azharr Rudin: It started with the main location in the film—the Bukit Chagar flats. They were like a dear old friend. I had family and friends who lived there. It was hard not to notice the housing project, as it was among the earliest high-rise public housing (for lower-income groups) in the city, whose opening was officiated over by the former Malaysian prime minister in the 1980s—it was an integral part of the city landscape.

One could even use the flats as a watchtower and see a major portion of the city and even as far as Woodlands [a suburban town] in Singapore. They were first scheduled for demolition in the 1990s as the federal government had plans to replace the old causeway—which is the main physical tie between Malaysia and Singapore—with a new bridge that was part of the Southern Integrated Gateway, and the flats stood at the point where the

supporting infrastructures were supposed to go. And so I kind of use Bukit Chagar as an entry point into a short history of people and their environment.

DW: Could you say something about that particular city or area? (I believe it's where you grew up.) What are its specific characteristics and problems?

AR: (Yes, I still refer to Johor Baharu [JB] as my hometown. I left JB almost a decade ago to partly pursue tertiary education in Kuala Lumpur).

The city is a shopping heaven for Singaporeans, mainly due to the fluctuation of the Singapore dollar and the devaluation of the Malaysian ringgit, which resulted from the 1997 financial crisis. The recession also left numerous abandoned/unfinished buildings. Malaysia's ruling party (which has been in power for more than half a century—since independence) was founded in JB.

I remember that many people from JB itself and other parts of the country used to flock to Singapore to work mainly in the manufacturing sector. But oftentimes a lot of them ended up stranded in JB instead, either because of lack of space or qualification. The problems in JB are not entirely unique compared to other places.

Singapore was part of Johor at a certain point in history. Malaysian cinema began in Singapore.

In recent years, Singaporean investors have been given unprecedented amount of access to the city. The construction of a bridge (a brainchild of the former prime minister) to replace the causeway was scrapped and replaced by a larger-scale project, Iskandar Development Region (brainchild of the *current* prime minister), which covers the entire district of JB and is about three times the size of Singapore.

But, in any case, the flats and its residents were conveniently removed from the city center to make way for the construction of an MRT [mass rapid transit] station to (and possibly for) Singapore. The former residents were given new and slightly bigger apartments some

distance from the city. Those with higher incomes took this opportunity to move to bigger houses elsewhere, while those with less economic power went along and moved to the new but shabbily constructed flats. Bukit Chagar flats was perhaps the last remaining low-cost housing in the city center before its demolition.

I will try to film the city more in the future.

DW: What are the conditions for ordinary people in this area?

AR: Not much to complain about. But one of their biggest concerns is perhaps over the sovereignty of Johor. Apparently, work on the bridge was stopped because Singapore had requested the use of Johor air space for its military aircraft and the purchase of sand from Malaysia for land reclamation in the island city-state in return for their agreement on the bridge. The ordinary people of Johor objected to these conditions.

Life in the Bukit Chagar flats became more difficult when management decided to keep maintenance to a minimum ever since news of the demolition first came out. The residents were finally shifted to their new apartments and given compensation money by the government to ease the transfer, just before the last general elections.

DW: There is a strong sense of absence, of loss, in the film: the loss of mother, affection, emotional stability. Did you mean the film to be disturbing in this way?

AR: I had no way to be certain what effect this film would have on an audience. I just tried my best to translate or pour some of the feelings that I felt into it.

DW: Could you speak about the connection, of lack of connection, between the first and second parts of the film?

AR: While writing the screenplay, the young woman in the second part of the film was initially a young man who had the same name as the boy in the first part.

But I later thought that it would be too easy to tie the two parts together that way. So I decided to try the approach you saw—the second part carries along with it a certain number of physical and external transformations. This way, I believe, the film is not restricted to just the people we see in the first part—which may appear to focus on a boy and his surroundings.

The changes I introduced in the second part were partly an attempt to drive home the point that the "story" does not belong exclusively to any one individual. It also opens up a somewhat different side of the people and place.

DW: What is the current situation for Malaysian filmmakers?

AR: We're all moving in a new direction. Generally,

Malaysian filmmakers have started to give more attention to technical achievements. Though this is generally more of a concern with form or cosmetics. Certain formulas are drawn up every time a local title becomes a box office hit. Most of these "successful" films are very "entertaining." Some "fringe filmmakers" have started to contribute positively to the local box office. But most of them are still quite comfortable doing their own things. In any case, fringe filmmakers are gradually accepted into the mainstream.

Most of the alternative films are shot on video, and so the establishment has created a special award category for it. The local censorship can be a bit unpredictable in terms of what (or who) they will allow to be shown—but they typically serve to protect the interests of the establishment. Almost the same goes for the local support infrastructure. The Internet has opened up unlimited space for films that otherwise would have been easily banned. Major financial and critical support for alternative films still comes from overseas. Hollywood is still Sultan, while Bollywood is now Datuk.

DW: What will be the consequences, in your opinion, of a global economic slump for Malaysia and the region?

AR: History is repeating itself. To what extent we still don't know.

DW: Why do you make films?

AR: Perhaps because it gives me a sense of purpose in life. Also, to help me remember—I can be quite forgetful sometimes. And I think it helps that I find cinema the language I'm most comfortable with—or so I would like to believe. But, really, I would equate my involvement in filmmaking to being in a romantic relationship—love needs no reason....



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