

# PRODUCTION NOTES

by Ravi Bharwani

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## ORIGINS

“Crazy” is the only word that comes to mind when I read about Jermal for the first time in a daily newspaper. At that very moment, I decided that one day I wanted to make a film on that location, even though I had no idea yet, what kind of story, what sort of technical difficulties I would face, or who would be insane enough to produce it. It was only years later, when I was struggling with the script, that I realized that my attraction to the Jermal was not purely aesthetic. It was the isolation and alienation associated with the place (being in the middle of the ocean) that fascinated me. These themes have always been a preoccupation of mine.

In the beginning, I tried writing the film on my own, but soon I joined a script development workshop led by director/producer Orlow Seunke. Orlow became interested in the project and agreed to produce it; he also created a development and scriptwriting team for the project consisting of scriptwriter Rayya Makarim, Orlow and myself.

We wanted to make a film that moved people, a believable film, not boring ... oh and one more thing ... a film with minimal dialogue (a special request I made for Rayya). During the scriptwriting phase of the film, not only did Rayya work hard to accommodate my wishes (eight words of dialogue is already too long for me), but she also had to face Orlow’s “craziness” when it came to details. Story and character discussions would go on for hours. One session can go on for seven to eight hours, and this might only be a conversation on how the protagonist (Johar) should react when he first encounters his estranged son. For the most part the debates we had proceeded politely like an English tea party. However, there were times when the discussions were less civilized and we looked more like hooligans after a football game.

## FUNDING

A small part of the financing was from private investors in Indonesia, while the majority of the funding came from several film festivals (the Hubert Bals Fund and the Hubert Bals Fund Plus from the International Film Festival Rotterdam; and the World Cinema Fund from the Berlin International Film Festival). We also received prize money when we won the Open Doors grant at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2006.

## CASTING

The creation of the character of Ahab is an interesting story. During the writing of the film, we felt Jaya needed a companion to ease him into the new environment. However, we felt that the character should not be too strong and make Jaya’s adjustment and acceptance on the Jermal too smooth. We still wanted Jaya to struggle to fit in even though he had a companion, albeit a very strange one. Rayya named this character Ahab.

You can't really call Ahab "crazy" but he isn't 100% normal either. He's not stupid, but he certainly isn't the brightest bulb in the room. Ahab is an eccentric character who exists in his own little world. He walks differently, he talks differently, and above all, he thinks he's a whale. Ironically, the boy who plays Ahab is also a unique individual. The boy playing Ahab is called Ribut (in Indonesian it means "noisy" and he was indeed very noisy), but he goes by the name Black because this is what the local community calls him. On one hand, Ribut got on everyone's nerves with his questions and his silly jokes. But on the other hand, he was always the first to lend a hand, helping the crew.

Searching for the boys was an arduous task. We wanted them to be believable so we decided to use boys from the local area. Bowie, from the casting agency, patiently went in and out of numerous schools, towns, villages, alley ways, Jermals, religious boarding schools in and around the city of Medan. No time could be wasted. Even on our lunch breaks, we kept an eye out for boys, in case a potential Jaya, Gion, or Topan passed by.

My most memorable moment is when we found the boy for the character of Topan. It was my last day in Medan and I was due back to Jakarta the next day. It was the last day of school, kids were ready to go back home for the holidays, and we still hadn't found the perfect Topan. We heard there was a religious boarding school about 70 km away from Medan. Since we exhausted all options in the city, we thought we might as well make the journey. It was our last chance. When we arrived, we gathered the boys in several groups and started the auditioning process. After seeing a few groups, I was ready to give up and return to Jakarta. It was only during the last group did I notice a boy; small, skinny, bold, and with slanted eyes. He impressed me with his improvisation skit which involved him acting as a medicine peddler, attracting customers in a noisy and chaotic market. His energy, loud voice, confidence, and improvisational skill convinced me; I was sold. I returned home to Jakarta relieved that we had a full cast for our film, Jermal.

## **UNPREDICTABLE WEATHER**

During production, the shooting schedule was not only determined by the production and directors' team, but also by the "nature" team (boatmen, workers on the jermal, fishermen). Without pay, and yet they were always happy to advise us on scheduling. This team was stubborn but at the same time indecisive. Everyday their predictions changed, which meant that we never knew when we could leave for the location and when we could get back on dry land. They claimed they knew what they were talking about, so we were forced to comply, despite frequent misjudgements.

The whole film was shot on the Jermal. We didn't want to cheat the audience by shooting interior scenes on a set. We felt that the emotions conveyed by the actors would be more authentic if they were placed in the actual location; to feel the real isolation and alienation of the Jermal. So, everyday, for a month (except for breaks and *force majeure*) around 30 of us had to walk for ten minutes from the hotel towards the shore to take a boat and travel 40 minutes to the shooting location. However, during low tide, the boats cannot approach the shore so we were forced to walk for 20 minutes, carrying all sorts of

heavy film equipment and gear, trudging through mud to reach the boats. Because we had a small crew, sometimes we had to do several trips back and forth to carry the equipment. This was exhausting as well as time consuming.

The production team did all sorts of research on tide times and weather forecasts, but nature is unpredictable, and the “nature” team ... even more so. As a result, there was never any certainty, and when there was certainty, it would change every half an hour. One time, I was stranded in a boat in the middle of the sea for four hours because the boatman miscalculated the tides. The boatman would casually apologize, light his clove cigarette and wait until high tide. A similar incident happened on one of my research trips. At night, I had to walk 45 minutes from the boat to the shore near the hotel. I was bare feet, it was pitch dark, wet, muddy, and I had no idea what I was stepping on.

Fortunately, the weather was generally mild, except when it rained non stop for two days. The waves were too high to go to sea. Not a single boat was in sight. The production team who worried about the schedule, set out to sea for a test run. They returned completely drenched. They confirmed that it was indeed impossible to go on location that day. The boat was practically vertical after being bombarded by waves. So we waited for two days for the storm to subside. To make things worse, one of the wooden planks that supported the Jermal broke. It was unclear whether it was caused by the storm or by the weight of 30 people and heavy film equipment. We had to reschedule again ... we had to calculate days again ... we had to make a new call sheet ... again.

## **MYSTIC**

Strange things happen during a full moon. For three days our hotel was attacked by thousands of flying insects. They only came at night, attracted to the light, and had a dreadful stench. This was not something we looked forward to after a hard day shoot. To enter our rooms, we had to break through thousands of these ugly bugs that swarmed around the lamp. We complained to the hotel and they decided the best way to avoid these insects was to turn off the lights. They couldn't think of a better way to solve the problem, because these insects appear every month during the full moon. So for three days, we came back from the Jermal to a dark hotel. We had to feel our way to our rooms, passing through the stinking smell of the insects which had very short lives. We couldn't do anything outside, so we were forced to do all shooting preparation behind the closed doors of our hotel rooms. The atmosphere resembled a scene out of Hitchcock's "Birds;" a sequel perhaps?

Another bizarre incident around the full moon period occurred during a dinner break on the Jermal. Ahab aka Black aka Ribut was feeling feverish and started to shiver, so we decided to send him back to the hotel by boat. A few crew members led him into a big fish basket to take him down to the boat because he was too weak to climb down himself. Suddenly, he snapped out of his quiet feverish slumber and started to speak deliriously to himself. He rolled his eyes before shutting them and began to make strange movements with his body. At first, we thought this was just another way for Ahab to attract attention. After a while, however, it became obvious that he was

possessed. A few members of the crew tried to wake him from his trance, but Ahab was not himself anymore; he was transformed. Ahab clenched his fist; his fingers became rigid, forming a claw. He was on all fours, gripping the platform, moving slowly like a tiger waiting for his prey. To prevent Ahab from hurting himself or hurting others, a few crew members tried to hold him down. It was as if Ahab had gained some supernatural strength. It took four people to hold him down, each person tightly holding one of his limbs. When they asked him who he was, he answered, "Mayong." According to the workers on the Jermal, the word has two meanings: "keeper of the sea" and "young tiger." Both meanings made sense to us. The head worker at the Jermal said that this particular Jermal had a spirit looking over it, but it has never interfered with them until now. A crew member who claims he can discern spirits explained that there are three spirits guarding the Jermal, a family: a husband, his wife, and their little boy. He claimed that when he was lowering Ahab into a basket, the child pulled hard on his hair and ran to the other side of the Jermal. According to him, the husband has a bad temper and he was angry because he and his family were not invited to eat with us. The man entered an "empty shell" (Ahab) who consequently became possessed. Lucky for us we had our main actor Didi Petet and a few crew members who understood these unexplainable matters and within an hour Ahab was back to his normal self, with no recollection of what just happened. We cut the night short and went back to the hotel early.

The plot thickens. The next evening, two boys became possessed: Ahab and Rudy Hartono aka Mr. Black aka Franky. Both of them crept on the floor, bodies arched, ready for a fight. We don't know whether it was a battle between two "Blacks," two spirits, or two film characters. What we do know is that two nights were wasted on these unnatural incidents, but at least they were entertaining and served as a good anecdote.

## **SHOOTING STYLE**

One thing we tried to do was to shoot the film chronologically to make it easier for the actors to maintain their character development. We also ran the scenes from beginning to end without interruptions in order to get the best performance out of the actors. When Didi Petet had to jump off the Jermal, we let the scene run through without any cuts. Also when the boy playing Topan had to jump into the water, we let him do the scene from the beginning without any cuts to interrupt him. No stunts, all real. Before Jaya's nude scene, Rayya had to persuade and convince him for an hour while he cried. Again, we did the scene in one whole run, without interruptions. This method bears satisfying results as the emotions that the actors are trying to convey is presented in continuity without any disturbances, hence making the performance more intense and believable.

This was by far the most challenging shoot I've been on. The crew was creative and good natured in facing all the obstacles. All in all, I can only hope that people will come to this film and be able to enjoy a simple and universal story about a father and son relationship on a fishing platform in the middle of the sea.

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