

# FreedomFilmFest – A Malaysian Human Rights Documentary Film Festival

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**T**HE FreedomFilmFest (FFF) is Malaysia's first and only annual human rights documentary film festival. It began in 2003 with the aim to create a much-needed platform for filmmakers and activists to showcase their films and advocate their causes to the Malaysian public.

The FFF was the brainchild of Pusat KOMAS,<sup>1</sup> a Malaysian popular communications human rights non-governmental organization (NGO), as a means to promote human rights through social films.

FFF's tag line - "Dare To Document" represents the spirit of the festival – to encourage filmmakers to document and share their stories without fear or hesitation.

It has grown from a small community screening event to the present nine-day festival featuring over forty international and local films in Petaling Jaya city and then travelling across the country to six different states and also Singapore.

In January 2017, a non-profit entity called Freedom Film Network (FFN)<sup>2</sup> was formed with the main objective of promoting and supporting the development of social films in Malaysia and is now responsible for organizing of the film festival.

The film festival has several components:

a. Film screenings and post-screening discussions with the audience.

Each film is carefully selected to cater to the different social issues that the festival wants to highlight. The film screening will then be followed by facilitated discussion session with the invited filmmaker or resource person;

b. "Freedom Talks" are one-hour interactive forums which go deeper into a topic of film that is screened during the festival. The talk has two identified experts and a facilitator who would guide the flow of the discussion;

c. Thematic Workshops

These workshops are skills and perspective-building workshops, usually in line with the theme of the festival or films and cater to particular target audience and feature a guest resource person/trainer;

d. Master classes with guest filmmakers

These are workshops that provide opportunities for local filmmakers and potential filmmakers to gain some knowledge and information from the professionals/experienced filmmakers.

e. Malaysian Film Grant program

Each year FFF gives out small film grants and offer production support to Malaysians with the best story proposals. The shortlisted proposals are invited to pitch to a panel of judges who then select two to three winners. The winners will then be given the grant and have to produce their short twenty-minute film that will be premiered at the festival.

f. Film Competition and Award ceremony.

There is an open call for submission of film entries to the festival for three categories: Best International Film, Best Southeast Asia Film and Best Short Film. There is a panel of judges for each category.

The winners receive the *Justin Louis Award* named after a beloved colleague who drowned in the Baram River while on a fact-finding mission to investigate alleged human rights abuses inflicted on Indigenous Penan women in the interiors of Sarawak.

## FreedomFilmFest 2015

The theme of FreedomFilmFest 2015 (FFF2015) was “UNSEEN, UNHEARD, UNTOLD.”

The festival began with a week-long festival in Petaling Jaya then went on a nationwide tour to Johor Bahru, Muar, Penang, Ipoh, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching and Singapore.

FFF2015 showcased twenty-six carefully selected documentaries and human rights films from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand). There were also films from other regions such as Africa, Latin America and Europe. The films were organized under different human rights thematic concerns rarely covered by mainstream media such as Livable Cities; Ageing and Dignity; Interfaith and Multiculturalism; and Sports and Squander.

Film screenings were followed by facilitated twenty-minute discussion sessions where the audience had dialogue and exchange with invited filmmakers and relevant resource persons. Post-screening discussions are essential and powerful practice of the FFF and is crucial in drawing out some

of the core issues and questions from members of the audience who found the film very meaningful and informative.

Almost all the Malaysian and Southeast Asian filmmakers were in attendance to interact directly with the audience after the screening of their films, whereas directors of the international films were on skype to speak to the audience from as far as Holland, Australia and Chile.

Some festival highlights included the film screening of *Portraits of a Mosquito Press* by JL Burgos on media freedom in the Philippines during the Marcos regime which was followed by a special forum on media freedom participated by the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia, Gerakan Media Marah (Geramm) and filmmaker JL Burgos. The session ended with the launching of the Malaysian Media Monitoring Report 2015 prepared by CIJ Malaysia.

Other events included masterclasses to help facilitate exchange and dialogue among filmmakers and to develop capacity among first-time filmmakers learning from their more experienced counterparts. Among the speakers were renowned Indonesian filmmaker Hanung Bramantyo who directed *Question of Faith*, and Senior Producer of Al Jazeera's 101 East, TC Chan.

A Video Activist Forum was carried out on the last day of the festival to bring filmmakers from Southeast Asia together for an exchange of ideas, sharing of resources and building linkages among video activists in this region.

The winners of the Malaysian Film Grants were:

- David Buri for *Viral, Sial!* about the phenomenon of “viralling” on the internet and its implication on security and safety especially for women;
- Nizam Andan for *Sindiket* which offers a critical perspective at the result of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the illegal issuance of Malaysian identity cards to foreigners in Sabah state;
- Chan Seong Foong and Victor Chin for *Memory as Resistance: Grandma Kong defending Her Village* about the memories of an octogenarian who has lived in a hundred-year old Chinese Hakka village that is now at risk of being torn down to make way for new development;
- J Arrivu Jacob for *Di Sebalik Runcit* about the way the local small grocery shop owners are coping with new business models such as

hypermarkets and also new requirements such as the newly imposed goods and services tax;

- Jason Soo for *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy*, a documentation of stories of detainees of Operation Spectrum in Singapore in 1987.

The winners of the film competition were:

- Best Short Film: *Living In The Drains* by Marcel Simok (Sabah, Malaysia);
- Best International Feature: *I Will Not Be Silenced* by Judy Rymer (Australia);
- Best Southeast Asia Feature: *1987: Untracing The Conspiracy* by Jason Soo (Singapore);
- Most Outstanding Human Rights Film: Malaysian Film Grant Winner: *Viral, Sial* by David Buri (Malaysia).

The festival was organized with the cooperation of the Delegation of the European Union to Malaysia, Petaling Jaya City Council, Penang State Government and Selangor State Government. Other sponsors for the festival were the Penang Institute, Goethe Institute, Movies that Matter (Netherlands), MyDocs (Malaysian Documentary Association), PJ Live Arts, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

### **FreedomFilmFest 2016**

The FreedomFilmFest 2016 theme “What Lies Beneath” spotlighted the underrepresented human rights and public interest issues through the powerful medium of film. It was a call for everyone to dig deeper into the many urgent issues that individuals, groups, society and humanity are facing today.

Documentaries included fresh views into the war in Syria, Germany’s open-arms refugee policy, Indonesia’s six-religion administration, Sarawak’s forest destruction and corruption, worldwide food security, the cost of fashion, and women sustaining their role in the religious clergy in the United States; and also rare views into Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Kenya and even Estonia.

The ensemble was peppered with award-winning films, including *Radical Grace* produced by Susan Sarandon, *Among the Believers* directed by Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Ali Naqvi, *A Syrian Love Story* directed

by Sean McAllister, and *A Very German Welcome* directed by Carsten Rau and Hauke Wendler.

FFF2016 was also attended by filmmakers Marcus Vetter (Germany) and Sean McAllister (United Kingdom) as well as all filmmakers who were based in Southeast Asia. The festival also featured masterclasses and the inaugural Freedom Talks Series.

The festival screened a total of thirty documentaries and short films. The festival program included four masterclasses, a Southeast Asia (SEA) Video for Change network meeting and the introduction of FreedomTalks, a series of panel discussion and events related to some of the themes carried in some of the films.

The festival finale gave away three awards:



Freedom Talk, 2016.



Freedom Talk: The Good Food Revolution.



Masterclass with Marcus Vetter on “The Thin Line Between Documentary & Fiction.

- Best International Feature: *A Syrian Love Story* by Sean McAllister (United Kingdom);
- Special mention – *Among the Believers* by Hemal Trivedi and Mohammed Ali Naqvi (India/Pakistan);
- Best SEA Feature: *Emak Dari Jambi* by Anggun Pradesha and Ricky M. Fajar (Indonesia);
- Best Short Film: *Unsilent Potato* by Sein Lyan Tun (Myanmar).

These awards were presented based on how the films portrayed personal stories affected by national issues in ways that were compelling and emotive.

The festival also saw the premiere of a first of its kind animation film series – *Moving Voices*, in collaboration with Dasein Academy of Art and BFM: The Business Radio Station. The animation film series featured six personal stories of urban poor community of Jinjang Utara, with members of the community in attendance at the premiere screening.

The Malaysian film grants were awarded to:

- Nova Goh – *Unlocking Bengoh*, about an Indigenous Bidayuh community in Sarawak which had to relocate to make way for because of a water catchment dam;

- Ashleigh Lim – *Stories of my Father*, the filmmaker chronicles her father’s past as a political detainee.

FFF2016 ended its weeklong run in Petaling Jaya and then continued on a nationwide tour to cities around Malaysia. Compact versions of the festival were also screened in Johor Bahru, Penang, Muar, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, Ipoh and Singapore.

## FreedomFilmFest 2017

FreedomFilmFest 2017 (FFF2017) offered a compelling line-up of forty must-see films, showcasing the very best of local and international talent, boldly uncovering some of the most prominent issues of our time.

FFF2017 also offered festival-goers the opportunity to get up close and personal with cutting-edge filmmakers from across the globe, and brand new interactive workshops, talks, food-tasting events and musical performances – all expertly curated to complement the festival’s film screenings.

This year’s weeklong festival focused its attention on the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in particular the recognition that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”<sup>3</sup> With thought-provoking films and talks, focusing on globally relevant issues such as environmental degradation, ageing, food activism and countering extremism, FFF2017 catered to everyone.

FFF2017 also offered a thrilling addition to the usual program, debuting talent from Malaysia’s newly formed Freedom Film Network (FFN). Home grown FFN filmmakers, including two winners of the FreedomFilmFest Grant, took an in-depth look at local issues including rapid development and its impact on flora and fauna in Penang, (*The Hills and The Sea*), the plight of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia (*Selfie With The Prime Minister*), the consequences of unilateral conversion (*Diary for Prasana*) and policies surrounding the much anticipated 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections (*Saving Malaysia*).

The following awards were given out:

- Best International Film: *An Insignificant Man* by Khushboo Ranka and Vinay Shukla (India);
- Best SEA Film: *Nokas* by Manuel Alberto Maia (Indonesia);
- Best Short Film: *Sittwe* by Jeanne Marie Hallacy (Myanmar/Thailand/UK);

- Best Malaysian Film Grant Award *The Hills and The Sea* by Andrew Ng; and
- IDFA Pitch/Grant Recipient: *Eye on The Ball* by Chen Yih Wen.

FFF2017 continued its festival tour to five major cities in Malaysia, namely Sabah, Sarawak, Perak, Johor, and Penang from 14 October till 26 November and in Singapore on 11 and 12 November 2017.

Young Malaysians who attended FFF2017 called the experience “eye-opening” with the festival bringing them “untold stories” not usually highlighted by the mainstream media. But aside from youngsters gaining new experiences at this year’s festival, one of the benchmark events was an empowering filmmaking workshop aimed at promoting life-long learning for seniors, who gained new skills in documenting their own stories.

FFF2017 also engaged members of the Orang Asli (indigenous) community, as well as indigenous filmmakers from across the region who showcased and discussed their social films with the public. Seasoned indigenous activist and filmmaker, Shafie Dris, told the media that his filmmaking was a crucial tool to counter misinformation about the Orang Asli community. Another event highlighted the digital stories of eleven Temuan Orang Asli youth members from two villages in Negeri Sembilan who shared their experiences, aspirations and challenges in accessing adequate education in Malaysia.

The success of FFF2017 was in large part due to the support and active involvement of its partners/collaborators who engaged and connected different communities in important human rights workshops and discussions. Tenaganita for example helped FFF mobilize Overseas Filipino Workers residing in Malaysia to join the screening of multi-award-winning documentary *Sunday Beauty Queen*. Following the screening of *Theater of Life*, Pit Stop Community Cafe and Dapur Jalalan introduced the public to a lively movement helping to redistribute waste food to the homeless in Kuala Lumpur. Civil society organizations, Amnesty International Malaysia and Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), also collaborated with FFF to discuss Malaysia’s use of the death penalty following the screening of Filipino documentary *Give Up Tomorrow*.





Thematic Workshop: Shoot and Edit using an HP with the indigenous people.

### **Achievements and Impact**

As a result of the yearly Malaysian Film Grant program, FFF has created a growing collection and continuous production of alternative, human rights films about Malaysia, made by Malaysians, from the perspective of the marginalized and different from the content of mainstream media.<sup>3</sup>

This collection of films can be accessed online and forms part of the alternative resource materials on important Malaysian issues. The films are used in class by teachers, lecturers and researchers. They also play an important part in advocacy of issues and have been used as a tool to bring awareness, educate and as part of campaigns.

The sustained yearly film festival and the creative, strategic curation and programming have also earned the festival a positive reputation among human rights activists as well as film enthusiasts.

In its fifteen years of existence, FFF created and enlarged the audience and popularity of non-fiction films. More importantly, it introduced and demonstrated the power of films not just to entertain but to inform and move people to action on human rights violations.

FFF also plays a vital role in creating and maintaining a safe space where Malaysians can come together to discuss issues in a safe and open man-

ner via the facilitated post-screening discussions and Freedom Talks. This is important especially in a society where there are laws that go against the principles of freedom of expression.

It has also become a much awaited, key civil society event that brings activists, NGO workers and members of communities together under one roof.

## Challenges

FFF is constantly under the radar and monitored by authorities for content in films that may be deemed unsuitable (such as LGBT themes, those critical of the government and its friendly neighbors), with “sensitive” content (such as those that are sympathetic to or glorify the communists or touch on race and religion in Malaysia).

The law regulating film and screening is also very strict. The Film Censorship Act 2002 states that ALL films with very few exceptions (such as government-produced films and those meant for export only) must go through and obtain a censorship certificate before they can be screened.

A closed-door private screening of award-winning documentary *No Fire Zone; The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* resulted in the raid and subsequent arrest of three staffers of Pusat KOMAS and subsequently one of the three (Ms. Lena Hendry)<sup>4</sup> was criminally charged and found guilty of failing to obtain prior consent and license/approval from the censor board. FFF does not send to the censor board the films to be shown.

The human rights branding and semi-illegal status have also been a deterrent to the organization from obtaining support and sponsorship from commercial/corporate companies that do not want to be seen as supporting an event that could potentially get in trouble with the authorities.

In the past year, FFF shifted to putting the films online and conducting the screenings via projected online screening to avoid potential legal persecution. This is still a challenge because of bandwidth and other technicalities related to streaming a film online. Nevertheless, the audience is informed and understands the predicament.

Other constant challenges being faced by all film festivals are how to reach new audiences, secure enough funding for the next edition and also have a skilled and capable team to run the festival.

## **Future**

The creation of the Freedom Film Network led to the forming of a network of social filmmakers - most of them are alumni of the festival - who are interested in working together to produce alternative films. FFF hopes that this structure becomes a model that ensures the sustainability of social films in Malaysia.

FFF continues to try to enlarge its audiences and find new ones by the choice of topics and themes undertaken every year. The themes of the films have now widened to include films that touch on contemporary social and cultural rights and issues such as ageing, mental health, food security, livable cities and sustainability.

## **Endnotes**

- 1 See Pusat KOMAS website for more information <http://komas.org/>.
- 2 Freedom Film Network, <https://freedomfilm.my/>.
- 3 [Freedomfilm.my/festival/films](https://freedomfilm.my/festival/films)
- 4 "Film Censorship Act provision constitutional, Federal Court rules Diterbitkan pada," *Berita Malaysia*, 14 September 2015, <http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/film-censorship-act-provision-constitutional-federal-court-rules-73266>.

