

P. RAMLEE
The Bright Star



JAMES HARDING, until his retirement, was Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Greenwich. Dr Harding is an authority on the music, theatre and literature of France. The subjects of his books have ranged from classical composers like Saint-Saens, Massenet, Gounod and Offenbach to the avant-garde Erik Satie, the popular performer Maurice Chevalier, and the rock musical *The Rocky Horror Show*. He has written twenty-one books in all, including a history of French operetta and studies of Jacques Tati, the film director, and of the actor-dramatist Sacha Guitry. He visits Malaysia regularly. A chance viewing of *Nujum Pa' Belalang* alerted him to P. Ramlee and led to a very fruitful collaboration with Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji which has been a labour of love for them both.



AHMAD SARJI was the Chief Secretary to the Government of Malaysia from 1990 to 1996. Among his published works are *The Chief Secretary to the Government, Malaysia* (1996) and *P. Ramlee: Erti Yang Sakti* (1999). In collaboration with Johari Salleh, he had compiled P. Ramlee songs in three volumes, containing lyrics and musical notes. He is now President of the Badan Warisan Malaysia (Malaysian Heritage Trust).

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JAMES HARDING
AHMAD SARJI



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Preface i

P. RAMLEE AND ME

by James Harding

ON one of the my early visits to Kuala Lumpur, a Malay friend asked me: "Have you ever heard of P. Ramlee? He was like your English Noël Coward—actor, composer, singer film-maker" P. Ramlee? All I knew at the time was that the Jalan P. Ramlee stood at the side of my hotel.

A few evenings later I happened to switch on the television. The film that was shown had crisp and witty dialogue. The storyline was amusing and original. The acting, subtle and polished, was perfectly in keeping with the happy go lucky spirit of the story. The action, moreover, was varied by songs of great charm and by incidental music brilliantly conceived to underline a point or change a mood. This film which so entertained me was, I learned, called *Nujum Pa' Belalang*.

In the following week the "Theater P. Ramlee" presented *Madu Tiga*. Here was another comedy that sparkled with gaiety and allowed P. Ramlee to indulge in some delicious fooling. The ladies, as always in a P. Ramlee film, were pretty, and the star himself appeared at his accomplished best. Most enchanting of all, for me, was the song he sang. Here, as he lolled in his

ornate dressing gown, relaxed and at ease with the world, was the essence of his genius. The song was called "Pukul Tiga Pagi". It is, in my opinion, one of his finest numbers and the perfect example of a perfect song.

So began my love affair with P. Ramlee. Having already written twenty-one biographies, chiefly of nineteenth-century French composers and of leading figures in the French and English theatre, I was ready for something new. P. Ramlee, I thought, would prove a fascinating subject for a biography. I visited the little museum in Setapak and absorbed the atmosphere once breathed by the man himself. I started collecting books, articles, pamphlets and newspaper cuttings about him.

It did not take long to realise that my resources were sadly limited. The vital research material was locked away in libraries and museums. Much of it had been printed in Jawi, a language that was completely beyond me.

Then I had a piece of luck. A mutual friend, Mr. Henry Barlow, introduced me to Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, mastermind of the four massive volumes published by the Harvard Club of Malaysia and containing the words and music of P. Ramlee's songs together with lavish illustrations of film stills, posters and every kind of valuable documentation. Already collectors' items, they were later complemented by his *P. Ramlee: Erti Yang Sakti*, another essential reference book offering a wealth of information about the man and his work.

After enthusiastic discussions, the Tan Sri threw me a lifeline. Why don't we collaborate? he asked. The shape of the book was quickly blocked out, to use a theatrical term, and the various themes were soon sketched in. The Tan Sri gave me unrestricted access to his vast archive and arranged showings of rare films from his collection. He devised an odyssey which took me up and down Malaysia and over to Singapore, in the

course of which I talked to many people who had worked with P. Ramlee. I was touched that they all gave so generously of their time and hospitality to a foreigner. While I have learned a lot about P. Ramlee, I have also had the privilege of deepening my knowledge of Malaysia and Malaysians. As the English historian A.J.P. Taylor once remarked, if you want to teach yourself something the best way is to write a book about it.

This particular book would never have seen the light of day without the inspired labour of Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, who has at every stage been a warm and sympathetic collaborator with a ready solution to every problem. I hope it will help to spread the fame of P. Ramlee. He is, after all, one of the glories of a cultural heritage which deserves to be far better known in Europe, and, indeed, throughout the whole world.

London
23rd January 2002

Preface ii

P. RAMLEE—THE LEGEND

by Ahmad Sarji

IN his own lifetime, P. Ramlee created a myth of what a boy unschooled in music and in the performing arts would attain. For the world, he became a symbol of the eternal genius of music, acting and directing.

Despite the heights and brilliance he had attained on the screen and in the music world, he remained a humble person. He has a luminous quality—a combination of brilliant acting, melodious singing, radiance—to set him apart, and yet make everyone wish to be like him.

He is adored for his golden larynx. To preserve his prolific works, Johari Salleh and I had compiled his musical achievements in three volumes, namely *Irama Lagu* (1993), *Gelora* (1995), and *Air Mata di Kuala Lumpur* (1996). In 1999, I had authored *P. Ramlee: Erti Yang Sakti*, an encyclopedia on this great artist.

It has become near-compulsory to preface a Charlie Chaplin study with the question: "Why another Chaplin book?" One might just as well ask why there are so many volumes dedicated to Shakespeare or indeed, any pre-eminent fig-

ure in any given field. Despite the large number of accounts, there is always something new to be said about Chaplin or Shakespeare. The same is true for P. Ramlee. I am pleased to co-author this book with James Harding, an accomplished biographer.

We discussed very many hours together. Turning the pages of miles of newspaper cuttings, albums, microfilms, magazines, viewing the films and listening to Ramlee songs have been a riveting employment for me, and James.

Kuala Lumpur
21st August 2002

Chapter 1

PEARL OF THE ORIENT

NATURE hands out talent as if on a whim. Those who have it take it for granted. Those who do not can only stand aside and marvel. There is no substitute for talent, and neither training nor academic distinction can give birth to it. Talent shows itself in the most unexpected places and in the least likely people. That is why, on an official visit which included the town of L'ho Seumawe in Aceh, a minister of the Malaysian government was startled to see, reverently displayed in many of the houses there, a portrait of P. Ramlee. The town was the birthplace of Ramlee's father, and the inhabitants were understandably proud of their link, at one remove, with Asia's most popular artist.

Teuku Nyak Puteh bin Teuku Karim (1902-1955) was descended from the aristocratic family of Oleebalang in East Aceh. He was popularly known as Puteh Deat, meaning special, extraordinary brilliant, valiant. In youth, he had mastered the musical instruments of the Achehnese and could sing in a sweetly melodious voice. With all these gifts he was naturally much admired by the maidens of his native village, Kampung



Teuku Nyak Puteh bin Teuku Karim
(1902-1955), P. Ramlee's father



Che Mah binti Hussein
(1904-1967), P. Ramlee's mother



House where P. Ramlee was born, No. 4A Jalan P. Ramlee, Georgetown, Penang. The road was previously known as Counter Hall Road. This house is now a memorial

Chunda. He was also a *sandiwara* player and once headed the *sandiwara* group named Asmaradana.

When still quite young he quarrelled with his parents over some family matters, and, hot with annoyance, decided to leave home. Where should he go to get away from them? Penang was the obvious answer: it was near enough to be easily attainable without too long or expensive a journey, but far enough away to be out of reach of his family. So, at some time in the 1920s, he crossed the Straits of Malacca and settled in Penang, which had a sizeable population of Aceh traders.

If history is unsure as to what Teuku Nyak Puteh did for a living—he has been variously described as a navigator and a foreman—it is certain that he had little in the way of money or possessions to his name. In 1925 he married Che Mah binte Hussein (1904-1967) at Kubang Buaya, Butterworth. She was a widow and brought with her a son by her previous marriage called Sheikh Ali. The family set up house in a poor neighbourhood. This home was a modest wooden structure roofed with attap and supported on not very firm stilts. It featured a traditional verandah, a bedroom and an old-fashioned kitchen, all rather like the ramshackle home of the crafty Pa' Belalang in *Nujum Pa' Belalang*. It was not, even in those days, a very robust building, and over the years it creaked and crumbled into disrepair. Now re-named No. 4A Jalan P. Ramlee, it has been piously rebuilt as a memorial. Only the lattice-work was capable of reuse. Everything else was replaced. All that remained of the original site was the tree, where, according to legend, the boy Ramlee used to perform stunts inspired by his movie heroes Tarzan and Zorro.

In the year 1929 the family celebrated the birth of a son. They decided to call him Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh. He was born on 22nd March, the first day of *Hari Raya*. Teuku Nyak Puteh registered his son's name at school as "Ram-

lee bin Puteh" and dropped the "Teuku" element. "Teuku Zakaria" was unsuitable for the boy. In 1947 Ramlee entered a singing competition organised by the Penang Chinese Association held at the City Light Hall (named after the eighteenth-century Francis Light who established the free port of Penang). Ramlee decided then to add the letter "P" before his name, that letter being the initial of his father's name Puteh. From then onwards he was to be known as P. Ramlee in South Indian fashion. This change initiated by the boy showed very early in his life that he had a mind of his own.

Despite the modest circumstances into which he had been born, the child was to find a deal of free entertainment in Penang. Life in those days on the Island of the Betel Nut tree was relaxed and easygoing. Isolated from the traditions and formal ways of the Malay court, a cosmopolitan population thronged the narrow streets of Georgetown where no one, it seemed ever went to bed. By day and throughout the night busy restaurants and noisy cabarets plied their tumultuous trade. The odour of joss-sticks from the Khoo Kongsi, its dragon pillars and celestial mosaics guarded by lions of green granite, mingled with the smell of noodles cooked by street hawkers at their barrows. Chinese merchants clicked their abacus, street salesmen touted "jewels" made of glass, a lion dance escorted by throbbing drums paraded through the alleyways, housewives bargained vigorously over mounds of fruits. Through the endless swarm of traffic rumbled trishaws pedalled by sweating drivers. By day, on two wheels or three, they clattered and swayed in plumes of dust. At night the gleam of their side lamps flickered mysteriously as they vanished into the darkness. The memory of these *jinriksha* ("man-powered vehicles") remained with the son of Teuku Nyak Puteh when, some twenty years later, he came to make the film *Penarek Becha*.

If he ever tired of "people watching" in Georgetown, where the non-stop kaleidoscope of humanity swirled before his fascinated stare, he could always, assuming he had enough money for the ticket, take a trip on the funicular railway that coughed and spluttered its way up Penang Hill. Through the window he could look out on the slow unfolding of a panorama that revealed mountains, valleys and a placid blue sea. Far from the bustle of Georgetown, the quiet countryside was dotted with Malay *kampungs*. No chromium plate or skyscraper marred a tranquil landscape ringed by beaches of icing-sugar sand, where, absolutely free of charge, he could bask in the sunshine and swim as the will moved him. He made his own amusements, for there was little money to spare at home. The life around him was a constant source of interest since he was a bright, intelligent boy eager for new impressions and experiences.

All too soon his carefree existence as an urchin at large came to an end. The shadow of school loomed large and darkened the future. He did not take easily to the discipline of the classroom. Why should he stuff his head with dull and difficult subjects that seemed little to the point when life outside offered so much more of interest and things to do? His scholastic career, if it can be called that, began at the Sekolah Melayu Kampung Jawa and limped by way of the Sekolah Francis Light to Standard Seven at the Penang Free School. At none of them did he shine. In any case, he hardly gave himself time to, for he attended school on average for ten days at most in the course of a month.

When he did appear in class it was obvious that his mind was elsewhere. One of his teachers, puzzled by a strange humming noise, managed at last to track down the source. It was Ramlee, who, his head filled with the latest popular tunes, was unconsciously humming them to himself. The lesson stopped,

a rebuke was administered, and the teacher resumed. A routine had been established. It was to be repeated, for Ramlee had become absorbed in the one activity guaranteed to hold his attention: that of music.

On the days when he was not a reluctant schoolboy, and there were many of these, he was busy following various bands of musicians from engagement to engagement. He tracked them around Penang, listening closely to every number they played, comparing their different approaches, studying their techniques and appraising their style. In this way he learned such things as how to appreciate the difference between keys and how choice of this one or that one could alter completely the atmosphere of a song. Soon he knew how to distinguish the many types of rhythm that lay at the command of the musician—the *joget*, the beguine, the paso doble, the conga, the *zapin* and many others that lend pulse and colour to the melodic line. As he gazed absent-mindedly through the classroom window, he would begin to hum a samba or a bolero to himself. And, once more, for the hundredth time, his teacher, exasperated, would tell him to shut up and to stop disturbing the work of the class.

But he was not unpopular at school. Even the teachers who deplored his absences and his lack of enthusiasm had to concede his charm and his agreeable manner. He had many friends among his classmates. One of them was Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen (now Tan Sri) who played in the same football team at Penang Free School and who later became a Cabinet Minister. At various times he held the portfolios of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Information.

He made up for his lack of distinction in class by his prowess on the football field. Each boy at school was assigned to a "house" and each house was represented by a football team. In matches against other houses the one to which Ramlee be-

longed triumphed most often. He revealed talent as a goal-keeper. Agile, alert, ready with split-second timing and an uncommon ability to sense which way the ball would come, he performed many a spectacular save to ensure victory for his home team. Diving, weaving, sometimes running out of the goal mouth to meet the attack head-on, Ramlee could usually be relied upon to hearten his team mates by lofting the ball far across the pitch out of danger.

When he was ten years old the newspapers spoke of war in Europe. If he heard of it he paid little attention, for Europe was a distant part of the world, a region that few people knew or cared about. Indeed, the authorities haughtily dismissed any rumour that development there might affect the Malayan peninsula. The sea had been swept clear of enemy shipping, it was announced, and the possibilities of defeat did not exist. Anyone who said otherwise, added official statements, was guilty of spreading alarm and despondency. What could be more positive than the declaration made by the Governor Sir Shenton Thomas, at a ceremony where he unveiled the statue of Francis Light? "There has never been since the outbreak of war a single moment when it has seemed that the peace of Malaya might be disturbed," he blandly informed the assembled dignitaries.

When the enemy forces invaded, however, they swept through the country with ease in a matter of months. Tanks were accompanied by hordes of troops riding briskly on bicycles, lightly armed but invincible. Kota Bahru was quickly invested, Singapore fell with little delay, and Sarawak followed suit. The easygoing days were over.

At first it seemed that the invaders were blood brothers who came to preserve Asia for the Asians. It soon became apparent, though, that the real reason for their presence was an urgent need of oil and other raw materials. The country was plundered for supplies. Inflation spiralled, food became scarce,

poverty spread. Life generally took on a harsher aspect. The invading force reserved its most brutal treatment for the traditional object of its hatred, the Chinese. Ahmad Daud (now Datuk), a friend of Ramlee from Penang, remembered seeing a Chinese beheaded. He never forgot the glitter of the sword as it swished through the air, the crunch of blade on flesh and bone, the head spinning away, the fountain of blood.

Apart, though, from the occasional ghastly scene, a boy like Ramlee could still lead a fairly normal life. Although still not a model schoolboy, he submitted with grace to the new regime at school, saluted the Japanese flag at sunrise as he and his fellow pupils were ordered to do, and learned to speak the Japanese language easily and idiomatically. So good did his command of it become that he helped his classmates with informal coaching. He found, too, that the Japanese, then as now, enjoyed singing. They liked to hear him sing, and one of them, Hirake San, gave him music lessons. The experience left him with an understanding of, and a liking for, Japanese popular music.

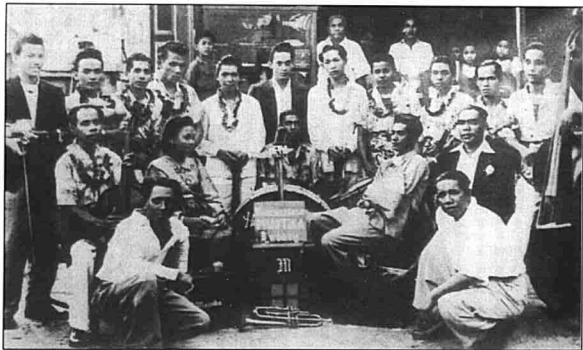
At the age of thirteen, largely self-taught, he was able to play the ukulele and could accompany himself on the bass line in "Donkey Serenade", "It's in the Air" and "Nona-Nona Zaman Sekarang". By now his musical talent was coming into full flower and he took regular lessons with the music teacher Kamaruddin bin Idris, a Rawanese who lived at Kampung Patani in Georgetown. Kamaruddin (the father of Normah, an auntie of the Malaysian co-author) found him an apt and ready pupil, quick to learn and easy to teach. At Kamaruddin's house he soon acquired the elements of musical notation and mastery of the guitar and violin. Learning to differentiate between G sharp and A flat, or recognising time signatures, was so much more fun than all the stuff about right-angled triangles he'd been forced to endure at school.



The Kumpulan Pancharagam Teruna Sekampung of Penang, 1947.
P. Ramlee (left, with violin)



P. Ramlee (seated centre with bow-tie) with the Kumpulan Orkes Mutiara, Penang, 1946



The Kumpulan Pancharagam Mustika, Butterworth, 1947. P. Ramlee on the extreme left

His facility was amazing. Not long after he entered his early teens he added the piano and saxophone to the number of instruments he could play. These were soon to be followed by the trumpet, the accordion and the xylophone. He was a child prodigy able to perform on most of the instruments in an orchestra. It is impossible to explain or analyse Ramlee's musical gift. The average student of the piano, for example, takes time to explore the keyboard, to work out fingering and to know how to keep the balance between left hand and right. Ramlee, it seemed, picked up all these things overnight, together with a voice that was charm itself. All we can say is that he came into this world with a sheaf of talents that were ready to mature while he was still a child. As Goethe remarked: "The musical talent may well show itself earliest of any; for music is something innate and internal, which needs little nourishment from without, and no experience from life."

It was inevitable that, armed with these accomplishments, he should want to compose songs himself. As he neared the age of seventeen it occurred to him that, living in the north of the peninsula, he but rarely heard new Malay songs. *Canggung* and *Makyong* songs predominated. To help redress the balance he composed and wrote the lyric as well of a song called "Azizah". The lyric celebrates the beauty and the sweet smile of Azizah in verse which is simple, direct and moving. It is matched with music that has the same spontaneous allure and develops at a lively pace to broaden out into a heart-warming melody as assured as anything Ramlee was to write in later years. It shows that while he was still very young the gifts that were to bring him fame in his maturity were already fully formed.

In 1945, he started with a band called Teruna Sekampung. One of his activities with these "lads from the village" was that of a song arranger, and in this way he quickly gained wide experience and knowledge of all the popular music then to be heard.

There were four "lads", all dressed in white and playing a variety of stringed instruments. A contemporary photograph shows them facing the camera, bright-eyed and youthful. P. Ramlee, fresh-faced and, at that time, chubby of cheek, beams eagerly out of the picture. His violin nestles under his right arm and the bow hangs elegantly from his fingers.

Ramlee left Standard Seven at school with relief. He had enjoyed the companionship there and made many friends who were to stay with him for life, but he was impatient to follow a career in music. With his mates in the Teruna Sekampung he played during the evenings at a restaurant in Butterworth. Soon they were winning engagements throughout the whole of Penang. More followed in Perlis, Kedah and Perak, and their local fame grew to such an extent that they began regular broadcasts on Radio Malaya, Penang. The success of "Azizah" encouraged Ramlee to write more songs which he sang himself on the radio. "Baidah" was one and "Abang Dollah" was another. The music welled out of him and produced a ceaseless stream of songs, among them "Mee Jawa", "Joget Malaya", "Malam Thaipusam" and "Padang Kota". In 1946, while still at school, he won first prize in a *keroncong* singing competition for the whole of Penang island. His winning entry was entitled "Keroncong Oh Suchi". In the same year, he again entered a competition for vocalists and this time won second place.

The Teruna Sekampung was succeeded by a larger group. A nine-piece band, the Orkes Mutiara, began to accompany him on Radio Malaya, reinforced by accordion, clarinet and double-bass. By 1947 he was leading a much bigger formation in Butterworth which was double the size of the Orkes Mutiara. One day they posed for a group photograph which has happily survived. Ramlee is seen to have given up the all-white outfit which his fellow Teruna Sekampung used to wear and which made them look like members of a cricket team. He has

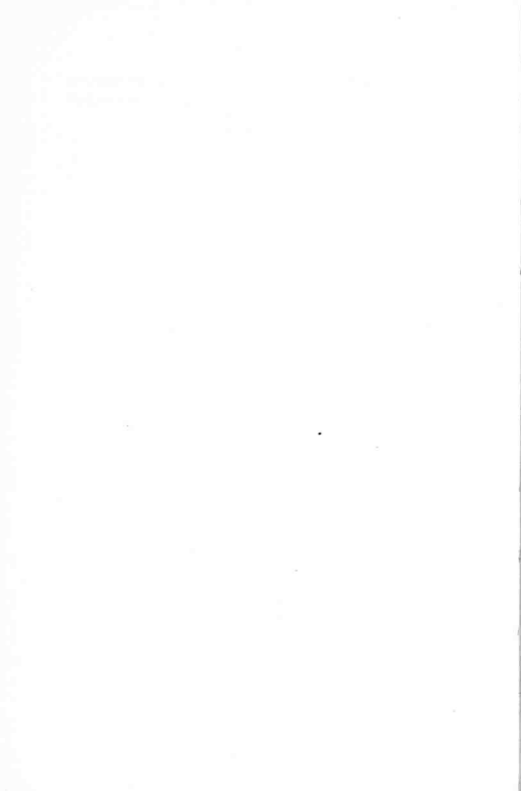
also left the formal bowtie and dark suit he wore with the Orkes Mutiara. Now he sports an open-necked shirt and a mix-and-match ensemble. Although the violin rests on the crook of the arm and the bow hangs from his fingers in a familiar pose, he looks altogether more relaxed, more in command, more confident about the present and the future.

He had cause to be. In the same year in another competition organised by Radio Malaya, he came out top and was judged champion singer of Northern Malaya. His fame was growing. In 1948, with a friend named Mohd Yusof, Ramlee formed a music band called Pancharagam Mustika.

One evening on 1st June 1948, he was invited to sing in an agricultural show at Bukit Mertajam. It was a typical engagement for those days when he and his band roamed the country playing one-night stands. Among the audience was B.S. Rajhans, a prominent figure in the fledgling Malay film business. Always on the alert for new talent of every sort, he lingered in the crowd to hear Ramlee sing "Azizah", it is said. Something about the young man intrigued him. Ramlee did not have noticeable good looks. He was thin, scrawny even, and his face was dotted with teenage pimples. But there was something about him, certainly a velvet charm to his voice and a confident musicianship, that attracted the film director.

After the performance he went up to Ramlee and invited him to join the Malay Film Productions Ltd in Singapore. Ramlee was startled and at first reluctant. He had always wanted to be a singer and a musician before anything else. Yet as a keen filmgoer and a fan of Tom Mix and Buck Jones, he also had an ambition to be a screen star. But he had first to obtain the consent of both his parents before accepting Rajhans' offer. Rajhans argued persuasively. He pointed out that opportunities for music-making in the film studios would be even greater than those Ramlee enjoyed at the moment. A few

weeks later, on 9th August 1948, the first day of *Hari Raya*, together with his friend Sukardi, Ramlee packed his modest luggage and set off by train for Singapore.



Chapter 2

CITY OF THE LION

SINGAPORE by that time had emerged, somewhat broken but nonetheless unbowed, from the ravages of invasion. The lively prewar spirit had returned. Unlike today's clinically clean layout of skyscrapers and shopping plazas, it was a centre, untidy but vibrant, of artistic experiment. Typical of the atmosphere in those days were the modest premises that occupied a cramped site at No. 8 Jalan Ampas. Here stood the headquarters of the Malay Film Productions (MFP), the successor of a company dating back from 1937. When the Japanese arrived they commandeered the studios and made propaganda films there. At the end of the war, the founders of MFP resumed production and in 1947 launched their peacetime career with the film *Singapura di Waktu Malam* featuring their latest discovery, a youthful and engaging starlet called Siput Sarawak. Among the other new faces they introduced was the beautiful Kasma Booty whom they starred in *Chempaka*, dressing her in a sarong and emulating the escapist Hollywood epics of Dorothy Lamour. The men in charge of MFP were none other than the legendary Shaw brothers.

Run Run and Runme Shaw, born Shiao, were two of four brothers originating from Shanghai. During the 1920s they began making and exhibiting films throughout China. Their father, a rich textile manufacturer, did not, however, approve, so they left Shanghai and transferred their activities to Southeast Asia. At first, they travelled around Malaya and Indonesia setting up their equipment in the open at populous *kampungs* and projecting their films on white sheets hung from palm trees. At that time, and even after the war, films were often shown in open-air theatres (*panggung*) usually dedicated to *bangsawan*, where the audience perched on hard wooden benches surrounded by walls of corrugated iron. Would-be spectators who could not afford the entrance fee of thirty cents climbed up jackfruit and other trees outside, and holding on to the branches like grim death and fighting off the depredations of swarming *kerengga*, watched the show free of charge. It is easy to imagine the impecunious Ramlee doing the same.

In the meantime the Shaw brothers quickly built up a chain of more than a hundred permanent cinemas throughout the region. Runme was the financial and administrative genius while Run Run concentrated on producing films that would pack in the audiences. When the Japanese invaded they confiscated the cinemas and imprisoned Run Run on charges of subversion. By a fortunate chance the Shaw family had prudently buried in a secret spot a chest crammed with gold and diamonds. Duly excavated after the war, the hidden treasure gave the Shaw brothers the necessary finance to start all over again at the Jalan Ampas Studio precincts.

The Shaw brothers were not the first to produce Malay films. The earliest venture in the medium is generally accepted to be *Laila Majnun*, a Sanskrit fable about two ill-starred lovers which was acted out by a local opera group. It was directed in 1933 by B.S. Rajhans (1903-1955), then lately arrived from his

native India, and financed by the Motilal chemical company of Bombay. This was the same Rajhans who spotted Ramlee at Bukit Mertajam.

Other Indian directors were imported by the Shaw brothers, since at that time there was a scarcity of local film talent on the ground. Actors and actresses were recruited from the cabarets of Singapore and from the Malay and Indonesian troupes who performed in the Malay stage shows of *sandiwara* and *bangsawan*. Quite soon a large reservoir of talent was established and subsequently drawn to cast ten or so films a year. This was the golden age of Malay cinema, a period when, as in the classic days of Hollywood, inspired improvisation made up for the lack of technical resources.

Where, though, did the plots and storylines come from? At first the Shaw brothers experimented by trying to adapt existing Chinese films. The result was disappointing. Malay audiences did not identify with them and were happier with Indian-type films, perhaps because they felt closer in temperament. So directors often took their material from Indian sources, converting and adapting plots, sketching sets, dashing off scripts overnight, and shooting them straightaway next morning. The films were in black and white, and the studio had its own laboratory for processing and editing. Sound recording was done direct. Only in later years did post-synching come into its own.

Presiding over all this feverish activity was the deceptively bland figure of Run Run Shaw, later to be Sir Run Run. His business principles were simple: for each dollar he put into a project he expected to earn not, say, ten per cent in return, but another whole dollar. This technique made him one of the richest and most influential men in Singapore. He was also capable of the imaginative gesture. Once, by way of welcoming a young actor who had just signed a contract with MFP, he took

him on a tour around Singapore in his luxurious Rolls-Royce. The actor, who had never before seen the inside of a Rolls, lolled, overawed, as they proceeded majestically through the streets and Run Run obligingly indicated places of interest. They stopped at the grandest and most glamorous hotel in the city. The manager, the deputy manager, the *maitre d'hôtel* and a troop of flunkies lined up on the red carpet to greet them. Having been escorted to the best table in the restaurant, Run Run glanced briefly at the voluminous menu, leatherbound and promising the rarest and richest of delights. He ordered a bread roll and a glass of water.

Such was the novel, stimulating and often puzzling world into which Ramlee the nineteen-year-old country boy found himself abruptly pitched. His quick intelligence was fascinated by the techniques he observed being exercised around him. He saw how a scenario was broken down into a shooting script and how, unlike the procedure in the theatre, all the scenes at a given location were conveniently grouped together and shot out of sequence, so that an actor might find himself playing the final episode before he even got round to speaking his opening lines. He learned how camera angles and close-ups were used to heighten drama or strengthen a narrative. Most important of all, perhaps, he taught himself to understand the significance of editing and its vital contribution to the impact a film made on its audience. While other people involved in the day's work might leave the set as soon as activity ceased, Ramlee stayed on, watching and silently absorbing everything he could about his strange but enthralling surroundings.

Soon after his arrival at Jalan Ampas he was taken to Studio No. 8 and underwent the daunting ritual of a screen test. Sing "Azizah"! they told him. This he did, accompanying himself as he had at the fair in Bukit Mertajam. When Rajhans saw the result he found his earlier impression confirmed: this was a

young man with potential. His golden larynx produced a voice that had a rich, soothing appeal, and the manner was confident, assured, even though Ramlee had never faced a camera before. It became obvious that, in addition to his musical gifts, he was a natural performer on screen. Rajhans was impressed by the instant rapport that sprang up between his new discovery and the camera. The cold eye of the lens is ruthless. It immediately reveals those who cannot strike up a relationship with it. There are those, on the other hand, who from the very start enter into a conspiracy with it, almost a love affair, so that every move, every inflection of the voice, is affectionately captured. Ramlee was one of the latter type. Despite his callow appearance and skinny physique, he had the indefinable quality that distinguishes the born film actor. MFP engaged him as musician, playback singer and actor at a salary of sixty dollars (Straits Settlements) a week.

His duties at MFP included writing some of the songs, singing them, and leading the Orkestra Kembang Murni. Up to then he composed with no other guide than his own whim. Now, however, he had to conform to his director's requirements and write music that helped to create the atmosphere of the film. It was useful discipline. The Indian films on which early Malay productions were modelled had always featured, and still do, a cornucopia of singing and dancing. The music, as a result, was one of the most important ingredients. Ramlee did not let his director down. He sang five songs composed by that fine composer Zubir Said to enliven *Chinta* (1948), directed by Rajhans, his mentor, which he sang in duet with Momo Latif and Nona Asiah. The pattern was set and his distinctive musical idiom had begun to establish itself. Instead of the small audiences at weddings and one-night gigs to which he had been accustomed, he now had a unique opportunity of reaching out to the much vaster filmgoing public.



P. Ramlee and Siput Sarawak in *Chinta* (1948)



P. Ramlee at the piano in *Noor Asmara* (1949)



D. Harris and P. Ramlee

The leading man in *Chinta* was Roomai Noor. He had made a reputation in the *bangsawan* and brought with him its expansive flamboyant style of acting to the many successful films in which he starred. Siput Sarawak, whom MFP had launched on her brilliant career a year previously in *Singapura di Waktu Malam*, partnered him as his leading lady, dark-eyed and pouting-lipped. Besides being the playback singer for Roomai Noor, Ramlee was given a small part to play. Not yet wearing the moustache that was to become his trademark, in his scenes opposite Siput Sarawak he projected a competent image of youthful sincerity.

Having won his spurs as a singer, and in a modest way, actor, Ramlee was straightaway cast as a musician in another film called *Noor Asmara* (1949). It was again directed by Rajhans who noted, with approval, the progress his discovery was making—so much so, indeed, that almost immediately he included Ramlee in his next film, *Nasib* (1949). Roomai Noor played an heir who is dispossessed of his property by an unscrupulous brother, and Siput Sarawak appeared as the beautiful Sultan's daughter whom he eventually marries. The plot featured marauding pirates, buried treasure, the abduction of a princess, and an exciting battle between the pirates and the forces of good. With Momo Latif, Nona Asiah and a supporting chorus, Ramlee sang the title song, a number celebrating Fate in a cheerful, ambling melody. It was one of the half-dozen songs which another fine composer Osman Ahmad wrote for the film, including a haunting invocation to the moon, "Oh Bulan". He also played a substantial role as one of Roomai Noor's two roving companions. The film, like the character it portrayed, had an interesting *nasib* (fate): it was screened and acclaimed at a Commonwealth Festival organised in London by the British Film Institute (BFI). Despite the Malay dialogue, the BFI suggested that it was suitable for screening to children's audi-

ences—a tribute to acting which transcended the limits of language.

With each film he made the role given to Ramlee grew larger. In *Nilam* (1949) Rajhans cast him as one of the juvenile leads. For the first time he was seen wearing the trim moustache that was to become famous. Once again the crowd-pleasing partnership of Siput Sarawak and Roomai Noor graced an exotic story which mingled elements of the *Arabian Nights* with those of fairy-tales. The richly complicated plot, set in Java, involved a magic keris, an evil genius, a flying horse, a priceless jewel guarded by haunted mummies, a belt that made the wearer invisible, a blind man who regains his sight, and the customary finale of a happy marriage between two lovers after many adventures. To make confusion worse confounded, Siput Sarawak played two roles: that of *Nilam*, daughter to the King of Egypt, and that of the beautiful dancer Dilara. Much trick photography, supported by Osman Ahmad's insinuating melodies sung by Ramlee, enhanced a mixture that was typical of MFP films at the time.

The fifth film Ramlee made under Rajhans' direction was *Rachun Dunia* (1950), a contemporary melodrama of love and marriage. For this he was promoted to a bigger role than any he had previously played, and appeared as the partner of Siput Sarawak. She was cast as a society woman blessed with a dubious glamour liable to entrap the unwary. The role gave Ramlee the chance to display his acting skill, for, as the unscrupulous associate of Siput Sarawak, he was to break up a happy marriage. It was not a part guaranteed to win the sympathy of the audience, and it is a measure of the progress he had made that his performance carried conviction. One of the most charming musical numbers composed by Zubir Said which he sang as a duet with Nona Asiah, doubling for Siput Sarawak, was "Kulam Mandi", an evocation of the pool where he swam "beneath

the blue sky and beside the tree". With this film, in which he played at various times both the violin and the guitar, he began to approach maturity as an actor and to fulfil the promise Rajhans had detected but a short time ago at Bukit Mertajam.

The director who gave Ramlee his big chance to achieve ultimate stardom was Lakshmana Krishnan (now Dato'), a famous pioneer of Malay films. Originally from Madras, he is quadrilingual, speaks fluent Japanese, and during the war acted as an interpreter in Sumatra. After that he went home and, among his various other activities, founded the Youth Movement of the Indian Congress in Madras. By 1947 he was a leading light in the Madras film studios where he gained the expertise that made him one of the few people in the region who understood the technical demands of film-making. In 1949 the Shaw brothers recruited him for MFP. "Film-making in those days was all about satisfaction, enjoyment and creativity," Dato' Krishnan recalls. "It was motivated principally by the excitement of beginning a project, nurturing it and witnessing its completion. The most important thing during that time was the spirit that pervaded the film industry. I always describe film-making in those days as akin to a picnic. Technology was cumbersome, resources were small, but we took great delight in our work and watching the project take form. In those days we were not motivated by money. Instead, we took competition and excellence to be the mark and yardstick of our efforts. But in all this we enjoyed ourselves. The work was not always easy but we loved it."

Now a much honoured principal in the Malay film business and a devoted worker for many charities and good causes, Dato' Krishnan is responsible for encouraging the careers not only of Ramlee but also of Roomai Noor, of Kasma Booty and of other now famous names. "It was a very raw industry at that time," he says. "The director was basically the anchor of every-

thing. He wrote the scripts, planned the sets, did all the production work and then had to direct the film. It was a one-man job. My immediate reference then was Indian films. Often we borrowed story lines from Indian films and transplanted them into a Malay setting."

The other main source of material was the *bangsawan*, where Krishnan discovered Roomai Noor. It was, however, a highly theatrical form much flavoured with melodrama. "I used to venture to the *bangsawan* frequently in those days," Dato' Krishnan continues. "But I never really favoured the typical *bangsawan* actor for the simple reason that he would always overact. And this did not go down well on film. As a result I began to look for more versatile talent and that is how I chanced upon P. Ramlee. In 1950 I was working on a film entitled *Bakti* (1950) and was sourcing a lead actor for the role of the hero. At that time Roomai Noor was everyone's favourite choice but I decided to go for Ramlee." Ramlee, as we have seen, with his skinny physique, was scarcely heroic material. "But," adds Dato' Krishnan, "he had that voice. And that voice was loaned to leading actors at that time, including Roomai Noor. I decided to turn the tables with *Bakti* and featured Ramlee as the hero with Roomai Noor as the villain." The plot of *Bakti* was inspired by the famous episode in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, in which a vagabond is given shelter one stormy night by a bishop. The tramp steals a pair of silver candlesticks and runs away. The police contact him and confront him with the bishop—but the saintly man, out of the kindness of his heart, pretends not to know him and refuses to charge him with the theft, hoping that the gesture will make him change his ways.

The reversal of roles was successful. Ramlee sang the songs composed by Osman Ahmad, doubling the singing voice of the principal actors and filling a supporting part into the bargain.

The score included at least one curiosity. This was the song "Satay", which carried an echo in it of music written by the eighteenth-century Anglo-German composer Handel—by no means the type of musician to find in a film from Southeast Asia. P. Ramlee had begun to emerge as a screen hero. Krishnan found that he took direction very easily. He quickly grasped the mood of a scene and needed few takes or re-takes. If, at any point, he was faced with a problem that he lacked the experience to solve, intuition came to his aid and helped him overcome it. His gestures were entirely natural and unstudied, and his speaking voice, sonorous, full-bodied, was free of affectation. The camera loved him. Everything he did and said in front of it appeared fresh and spontaneous. There was no suggestion of the staginess associated with the *bangsawan* or the artificiality that actors used to the stage often display on film. Indeed his lack of theatrical experience was a positive advantage, for he approached the cinema with a mind completely free of preconceived notions. He was immaculately punctual in turning up at the studio for the day's shooting. And as always, when not acting himself, he watched and listened carefully to all that went on around him, his eager mind storing up concepts and ideas that one day would serve their purpose.

Bakti delighted its audiences. A new star had been born who was to bring a truly Malay inspiration to a cinema which until then had relied on Indian and other sources for its material. With success came money. Ramlee was now earning a hundred dollars a month. The prudent Krishnan, businessman as well as creative film director, urged him to make sensible financial arrangements, setting up a company, perhaps to safeguard his earnings and to make provision for taxes. Ramlee would have none of it. Talk of accounts and ledgers and records bored him. He was not interested in money for its own sake, and only valued it for the things it could buy. There were many

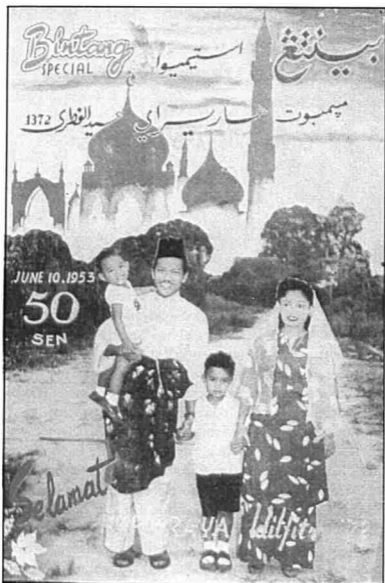
pleasures in Singapore on which he could spend it. When he was not in the studio, he passed the time agreeably in playing poker and *mahjong* with a crowd of friends. Sometimes there were high-spirited outings to the entertainment centres; he was already a chain-smoker of Lucky Strike cigarettes. All these softened the rigours of his professional career.



Chapter 3

LOVER, HUSBAND AND FATHER

AMONG the actors working for MFP at the time was an Indonesian called Daeng Harris. He specialised in comic roles and was cast in several of Ramlee's early films. The two men got on well together. The older man had a pretty daughter by the name of Junaidah. She, too, worked at MFP, where her pert little face and big liquid eyes were often utilised in bit parts. Ramlee, who was very sensitive to feminine charm, found her captivating. He fell so much in love that he proposed marriage and was accepted. They were married in 1950, officiated by the chief Kadhi of Singapore at the house of D. Harris at Boon Teck Road, Singapore. In 1953 she gave birth to a son. They called him Mohd Nasir. His father, preoccupied with a busy existence as composer, singer and actor, had little time for family life. As the boy grew up he became inured to his father's absences at work, and often for long periods his only contact with him was a quick note of greeting and farewell which Ramlee scribbled and left on the piano at home before leaving very early to arrive at the studio.



P. Ramlee (carrying Nasir) and Junaidah, both holding the hands of Abdul Rahman (1953)



P. Ramlee and Junaidah



Mohd. Nasir P. Ramlee



Left to right: D. Harris, Siput Sarawak and P. Ramlee



Left to right: P. Ramlee, Neng Yatimah, Daeng Idris, Siti Tanjong Perak and Yusof Banjar in *Takdir Ilahi* (1950)

At the age of twenty-one, Ramlee's life was full to overflowing. Besides his work at the studio he set up a publishing firm, Penerbitan P. Ramlee, which brought out books of lyrics, biographies of film people, a fortnightly tabloid, *Gelanggang Filem*, and *Bintang*, which appeared regularly for a while from 1950 onwards. The *Hari Raya* number of *Bintang* featured a colour cover showing Ramlee the family man in *songkok* and *baju* with his wife Junaidah and their small son. It is a happy picture and reflects a contented marriage which had not yet begun to falter.

The year of his marriage, 1950, was a crowded twelve months. He made three films during the period, including *Rachun Dunia* with B.S. Rajhans following up the success of *Nilam*. Then Krishnan came back into the frame and, following up the success of *Bakti*, gave him another big chance in *Takdir Illahi* (1950). Once again an element of the miraculous played a sensational part in the story. The second wife of a widowed Raja becomes jealous of her stepdaughter Fatimah since it appears that her husband loves the girl more than he does her. She conspires to have Fatimah doped and taken into the jungle where a hired assassin lurks to kill her. He takes pity on her, however, and instead of murdering her lops off both her arms. Ramlee is the warrior who rescues her and, despite her terrible injuries, falls in love with her. He wins her father's approval by leading his troops in a victorious battle against the invading army from a neighbouring state. Having meanwhile given birth to twins, Fatimah, who has never ceased to pray, suddenly finds that *takdir illahi* (the will of Allah) has restored her arms. All ends happily. Although Ramlee provided his usual quota of memorable songs, two of them sung in duet with Momo Latif, the most striking aspect of the film was the obvious progress he had made as an actor. His body was filling out, the teenage

pockmarks were fading, and he had gained in authority as a thoroughly believable and romantic hero.

In his next film with Krishnan, entitled *Penghidupan* (1951), he showed versatility by playing a character who, while handsome and dashing, is definitely no angel. Having seduced the heroine Salbiah (Rokiah) with promises to pay the family's debts, he then plans to marry a wealthy woman Halimah (Maria Menado). By a trick, however, he is lured into marriage with the heroine who has since given birth to his baby. This "pathetic story of a woman who is sacrificed at the altar of chastity", as the posters phrased it, enabled Ramlee to develop his talent still further, this time as a hero with more than a hint of danger, a lovable but unscrupulous Casanova.

Penghidupan was to be the only film Maria Menado made with P. Ramlee. She was twice crowned as 'Queen' in the All-Malaya-Indonesian Competition at Singapore's Happy World Stadium with the two titles: "International Beauty Queen" and "Kebaya Queen". *Penghidupan* marked the beginning of her distinguished career in the cinema.

The film also gave rise to controversy. The Malay Welfare Association of Singapore criticised it as harmful to the Malay character, religion and customs. Among the objectionable points it listed was the scene where a Sikh demands payment of a debt from Salbiah's mother and subsequently praises Salbiah's beauty. Another insulted Malays, the Association argued, when it showed the Sikh's Malay servant pressurising Salbiah's mother to surrender her daughter to the Sikh. The Association further claimed that Islam and Malay honour were outraged by the episode in which Salbiah was invited by Salim (P. Ramlee) into an empty house, the implication being that the purpose was sexual.

The sequence where Salbiah gave birth to a baby in hospital and breastfed it was claimed to be disgraceful behaviour for a Malay woman. When Salbiah was released from hospital, the nurse should have told her about the government's social welfare body, the Association declared, thus giving useful publicity to that organisation and its work. The scene where Salbiah and her baby were harassed by two young Malays reflected badly on Malay youth, as did several unrelated scenes of merrymaking. Finally, the deceit of exchanging brides was against Islamic religious practice and Malay custom. All these points were summarised in an official letter sent to the Singapore Film Censor and to Dato' Onn Jafaar. It did little to harm the success of the film.

The last film Ramlee made under Krishnan's direction marked his emergence as an actor of unrivalled dramatic power. If a graph were to be drawn of his maturing in the art of acting, it would start at the baseline with his fleeting appearance in *Chinta* and would gradually ascend under Krishnan's sympathetic tutelage until it reached a peak with *Antara Senyum dan Tangis* (1952). The publicity for the film rightly described as a "poignant drama" this affecting blend of "laughter and tears". Ramlee played Abidin, an engineer at loggerheads with his employer, the shady owner of the mine where he works. He resigns and starts work at another mine, only to find that the anonymous owner is his old antagonist. The situation is further complicated by the mine-owner's daughter, Maimun, who has fallen in love with him. His wife Faridah is supposed to have been killed in a train crash, leaving him to look after their small daughter, and eventually Maimun cajoles him into marrying her. In the meantime he is involved in a serious accident at the mine and loses his sight. Faridah, who, unknown to everyone, had survived the train crash, returns six years later to discover that her former husband is now blind.

In the concluding reel the tension is ratchetted up to the highest degree. Abidin's son by Maimun falls ill and dies, whereupon Maimun attempts, out of revenge, to poison her stepdaughter. She is, however, so startled by the sudden reappearance of Faridah, whom she takes for a ghost, that she falls headlong down the stairs and is killed. Abidin is reunited with his long-lost wife, and, though sightless, can look forward to a new and happier life in the company of his one true love. This strong plot is spiced with every sort of emotion: love, hatred, vengeance, envy and lust. It called for a wide range of ability from the cast, and, as the central figure, Ramlee showed a subtle command of expression. Even in his scenes with Maimun, when they were husband and wife and she took over as the dominant character, he was able, despite appearing henpecked, to retain the sympathy of the audience. Here, they felt, was a good man overruled by a shrewish wife. Triumphant over the problems of representing blindness, his performance conveyed both dignity and realism.

And still the music flowed. In 1951 alone, quite apart from the three films in which he starred, playing and singing his own music, he wrote the scores of five others, including eighteen songs. These he dubbed in partnership with Rubiah, Momo Latif, Lena and Nona Asiah. He composed quickly and easily, whatever the surroundings in which he found himself, and, even while playing an instrument, he could carry on a perfectly logical conversation.

What was the secret of creating a song that would appeal instantly to its hearers? As Lionel Bart has pointed out—and he, as the composer of such mould-breaking hits as *Oliver!* and *Maggie May* knew this more than anyone—a successful popular song begins in a way that is familiar to its hearers and then, suddenly, breaks out into a novel, almost unexpected development. Ramlee had this technique to perfection and used it with

brilliant economy. Take, as a random example, "Penghidupan Baru" which he sang with Rubiah in Krishnan's film *Penghidupan*. It starts with a low G natural and leaps up an octave, which Ramlee's deep tone easily encompassed, to introduce an easy-going melody. This leads to a tune in which the simple device of sharpening an F natural produces a delightfully refreshing effect. Another of his characteristic approaches is to shape his theme so that it echoes the simplicity of a nursery rhyme or of a traditional folk song, as he does in "Merayu Asmara" which he sang with Lena in *Antara Senyum dan Tangis*. The melodic line circulates then rises a fifth to descend gently to its conclusion, leaving the ear pleasantly satisfied.

As singer, composer and star actor, Ramlee had quickly matured into one of MFP's most valuable assets and a formidable weapon in the competition with Cathay-Keris Film Productions run by Ho Ah Loke and Loke Wan Tho. The latter constituted the Shaw brother's only serious rivals in a sphere where rising costs and the eternal battle to attract and retain audiences made the film business increasingly difficult. A film such as *Aloha* (1950) was a spectacular attempt to woo the filmgoing public with what the posters enthusiastically described as "flowers, songs and beauty", not to mention "hips swaying to nine lilting new tunes".

Aloha was indeed a sunburst of a film. Set on the glamorous island of Hawaii, it opened colourfully with the traditional Garland Festival Day and told a richly layered story of a pretty heroine, an unscrupulous trader, a notorious pirate chief and an enterprising band leader. The romantic interest was provided by the handsome Osman Gumanti, the leading lady was Mariam, and the band leader, inevitably, was Ramlee. As "Banjo" he played a key part in resolving the various strands of a complicated plot. More importantly, garlanded with exotic flowers, clad in flamboyant shirts, guitar always at the ready, he

sang with irrepressible charm and dragooned his orchestra with sparkling energy. If Osman Gumanti succeeded, at the end, in winning the favours of the alluring Mariam, it was, audiences felt, equally fair that Banjo should conquer the heart of Roseminah as the daughter of the crooked trader.

Always aware that throughout Malaya and Indonesia there awaited cinemas ever greedy for films and for audiences keen to see them, the Shaw brothers ran the studios in Jalan Ampas on a tight schedule. It was usually the director who, after obtaining approval for the initial idea, translated it into a scenario and shooting script, as well as plotting camera angles and choosing locations. A period no longer than three months was allowed to make a film, and if it were completed before that time the Shaws, who believed the labourer was worthy of his hire, handed over a bonus to the person responsible. It was not long before Ramlee was being paid twenty thousand dollars per film. This was not just because he happened to be a model employee who brought his films in in good time: the Shaw brothers now realised that he was a first class "bankable" property, as the film jargon goes, their biggest star and their most powerful box-office draw.

Chapter 4

INDIAN FILE

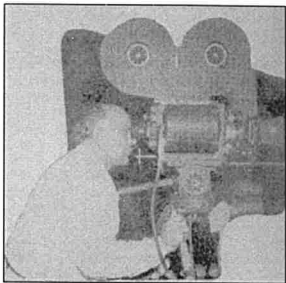
BY 1950, the year of *Aloha*, Ramlee was known everywhere on cinema screens throughout Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia. He had behind him the full support of the Shaw organisation with its unequalled publicity resources. In addition to their chain of cinemas, the Shaw brothers ran a string of amusement parks known as "The Great World", where, besides the traditional roundabouts, ghost train and Ferris wheel, seekers of entertainment could find snake charmers, fire-eaters and magicians. Here, too, were variety shows which alternated between Shakespeare and striptease, Chinese revues and demonstrations of *Seni Gayong*, the Malay art of self-defence. There was also a Great World cabaret which offered more than 150 hostesses as dancing partners and/or companions, together with a dance floor that could easily accommodate five hundred couples. A resident orchestra catered for musical events where songs from the latest blockbuster such as *Aloha* could be featured to publicise the film and stimulate interest.

We have already seen how the Indian director B.S. Rajhans "discovered" Ramlee at Bukit Mertajam and went on to feature

him in films that became increasingly successful. After *Aloha* he was to direct him in two more. The first was *Sejoli* (1951), a romantic drama. Kasma Booty played a beautiful orphan girl who gives birth to an equally pretty daughter. The daughter is adopted and brought up by a rich businessman. The latter's friend, the part filled by Ramlee, falls in love with the adopted daughter—but not before the complicated plot has involved family jealousy, a kidnap and an attempted ransom. Ramlee, as usual, was the winning hero, and one of the villainous kidnapers was his father-in-law Daeng Harris.

The last film that P. Ramlee acted in under the direction of B.S. Rajhans was *Anjoran Nasib* (1952), another love drama and a starring vehicle for Ramlee. In all the eight films in which Rajhans directed him, Ramlee was given the opportunity to develop all his talents. Rajhans was the earliest in the remarkable line of gifted Indian directors brought into the Malay film business by the Shaw brothers. True, there were also Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian and Japanese who made their contribution and helped turn Singapore into a vital film centre, but it was the Indians, being closest perhaps to the Malay temperament, who shaped the distinguishing characteristics of the industry. Balden Singh Rajhans, a Punjabi, was already a veteran who had directed in 1933 what is acknowledged as the first Malay film, *Laila Majnun*, sponsored by the Motilal Chemical Company of Bombay. (This unlikely sponsorship is explained by the fact that Motilal were big suppliers of carbon, a chemical widely used in film projectors). Before coming to Singapore Rajhans had made Hindi and Punjabi films in his native India. For the Shaw brothers he was to direct eighteen films in all, not to mention five others for Shaw's rival, the Cathay-Keris organisation.

His compatriot, L. Krishnan, a vibrant personality who is still very much with us, has already figured largely in these



B.S. Rajhans



L. Krishnan directing P. Ramlee (left) in *Bakti* (1950)



B.N. Rao



K.M. Basker (centre)



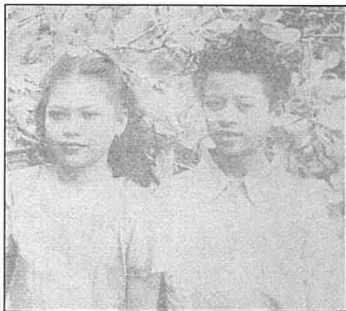
S. Ramanathan



Phani Majumdar



Left to right: L. Krishnan, P. Ramlee and Jamil Sulong



Saadiah and Syed Hamid in *Bakti* (1950)



P. Ramlee and Kasma Booty in *Bakti* (1950)



Mariam in *Anjoran Nasib* (1952)

pages. From *Bakti* in 1950 by way of *Takdir Illahi* and *Penghidupan* to *Antara Senyum dan Tangis* in 1952, he groomed Ramlee for stardom and helped his talent to flower naturally. He came from Madras, where he was born in 1922, and in 1928 moved to Penang where his father had set up a clothing business. After leaving school he went to Singapore and worked at the Raffles Hotel. Having acted as a Japanese interpreter during the war, he returned to Madras and entered the film industry in 1947 at the invitation of the Tamil director K. Subramaniam. In the following year he began his cinema career by directing a Sinhalese film called *Amma*. News of his activities reached the Shaw brothers, always alert for new talent, and he was duly tempted to Singapore where his first assignment was *Bakti*, for which he cast Ramlee. From 1949 he was much in demand, directing as many as three or four films a year. When his contract expired and Shaw brothers refused to increase his salary, he left them and made fifteen films for Cathay-Keris, who were much more generous in such matters. The Chinese entrepreneur Ho Ah Loke subsequently engaged him for the new Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur in 1961, and there he stayed, having put down roots in Malaya, the country where he went on to build a distinguished and much honoured career.

The original story of *Bakti*, which Krishnan directed, had been written by another Indian film director called S. Ramanathan who came to Singapore at about the same time as Krishnan in 1949. Two years later he directed Ramlee in *Juwita* (1951) opposite the exquisite Kasma Booty as his leading lady. Ramlee was cast as a famous composer who returns to the village where he was born and finds his childhood sweetheart afflicted with blindness. The plot concerns the vain attempt of another woman to win the composer's heart and the evil intrigues of the man whom he had always thought of as his friend

to gain the love of Juwita. This is not so much the eternal triangle as an irreconcilable square, although in the end Juwita's sight is restored and Ramlee, as the composer, has an obvious excuse to perform seven songs, including the haunting "Juwita" in slow bolero tempo.

Ramanathan was actually born in Kuala Lumpur itself in 1919, the son of a Tamil father who came there to work for the railway company. After his father's retirement the family went back to Colombo where Ramanathan was educated. A film fan from his earliest years, he had as a child wanted to be an actor, and the Tamil films he saw cast their charm upon him. One, in particular, *Chintamani* (1937), captivated him, and he contrived an interview in Madras with its director, Y.V. Rao, a cineast we shall meet later. Nothing came of it, and in 1942 Ramanathan started working for the British Admiralty. But he still could not resist the lure of the cinema, and in Coimbatore he began his career as a studio assistant and a bit-part actor. A friend then told him that the Shaw brothers in Singapore were looking for someone to direct Malay films. Since he knew Malay he was encouraged to apply. The Shaws took him on.

When he arrived at the Singapore studios in Jalan Ampas, however, he was shocked by the poor state of the equipment which was decrepit and out-of-date. Before committing himself to what at first seemed like a disappointing project, he arranged for Krishnan to direct *Bakti*. The result, fortunately, satisfied him, and he began making films there himself. Soon he was turning out three films a year, being fertile in new ideas and a quick worker into the bargain. What especially endeared him to the cost-conscious Shaw brothers was the speed at which he completed the job. He took only twenty days to shoot his first film and thereby saved them a great deal in production costs. Run Run Shaw cherished him, and when Ramanathan asked for new and expensive equipment, willingly told him to go

ahead. He, moreover, never sought to meddle with the actual process of filming and was content merely to supervise the progress made. In eight years Ramanathan directed eighteen films, much to the satisfaction of the Shaw brothers. After a successful collaboration with Ramlee in *Juwita*, he made *Sedarah* (1952) with him. *Sedarah* was a story of closely-knit family drama in which Ramlee played Harun, the tragic hero. He works for a Singapore shipping firm, little knowing that the owner is in fact his long-lost father. Neither is he or anyone else aware that his friend and fellow worker Hashim is actually his half-brother. Harun falls in love with the alluring Asiah (Rosnani); Hashim, also, is attracted to her. When she repulses his advances he arranges for Harun to be sent away on a long sea voyage and pretends that her lover has fallen for another girl. He forces his attentions on Asiah and Harun returns to find him trying to lock her in his embrace. Maddened by this treachery, Harun engages him in a fight. His father, meanwhile, has been re-united with the wife, Harun's mother, whom he had presumed dead, and the couple rush off to the spot where the young men are fighting each other. They are too late to prevent Harun stabbing Hashim to death, and only when Hashim breathes his last does Harun realise, too late, that they are of the same blood. He is convicted of murder, and while Asiah sheds bitter tears, is taken away to life imprisonment.

When *Sedarah* was released three of the songs it featured attracted strong criticism. "Kelasi" (sailor), to music by P. Ramlee, had a Mexican flavour and soon became popular. However, the lyric, by S. Sudarmadji, offended the Singapore Malay Sailor's Union which demanded that it be censored or rewritten or even banned. In a letter of protest to the Colonial Secretary, Radio Malaya and the Malay Film Productions, the Union took great exception to lines about sailors who "rose early in the morning and cleaned the boards, their teeth, their feet, the

saucer, their ears, their body." The verse, claim the Union, demeaned sailors, as did the lines that described them as eating boiled fish, burnt rice and "leftover glutinous rice". Never, said the Union, had a sailor been asked to eat that kind of food, even though the ship may have been struck by famine. Another point of contention was the reference to sailors who arrive in port, dress in style and hang around with girls. (It's really good to be a sailor.) Worst of all, in the Union's opinion, was the line: "*masuk depan, keluar belakang/lalu lalang, go-hed go-stan*". ("Enter from the front, exit from behind/To and fro, go ahead go astern.") It was both insulting and capable of vulgar connotations. There were two possible meanings. The first might be taken as referring to the rolling, unsteady gait of sailors when walking on land. The other reinforced the landlubber's popular misconception that sailors actually behaved in such a bold and swaggering manner.

Other protests were inspired by the song "Ayo-yo Ramasamy", which, said a critic, belittled Hindus. The lyric of "wal hasil balik asal" was also criticised as mocking the Arab community. Could not the phrase "Bald Arab" be changed to "Bald Alim"? It was asked. A spokesman for the Malay Film Productions explained that the songs were written to fit the humorous situations in the film and were not meant to hurt the feelings of any particular group. He indicated that the lyrics of "Kelasi" could be changed to something more satisfactory.

Sedarah, with its tragic combination of intricate family relationships and star-crossed lovers, called for powerful acting which Ramlee, under Ramanathan's sympathetic direction, summoned up with skill. True, in the course of the action he had attractive songs to sing, but nothing was allowed to hinder the inevitable progress of fate and the price the hero had to pay for his doomed love. In the following year, again with the same direction, Ramlee starred in another moving drama. It was

called *Ibu* (1953) and dedicated, as the message ran, "to every mother regardless of race, colour, class or creed. Every man may have a brother, a sister, a wife or even a friend. But every living creature on earth has a mother, the one who delivered you and me into the universe."

Ramlee was Raimi the shoe-shine boy who lived in poverty with his blind mother and who tried to support them both on his meagre earnings. One morning, as he threads his weary way through the streets, he overhears the famous musician Zulkifli playing the trumpet. This awakens his ambitions, and thanks to the kindly teaching of Zulkifli he becomes a brilliant trumpet player who achieves fame and riches in Singapore. The attractive *kampung* girl Hamidah (Rosnani) falls in love with Raimi—but so, too, does the golddigger Ratna, who, with her cunning wiles, estranges him from Hamidah and eventually marries him. She also poisons his mind against his loving mother. Unable to bear any longer the venomous accusations which Ratna had made against her, his mother leaves home and, blind and heartbroken, wanders the streets of Singapore. A car knocks her down and she is taken to hospital. Raimi, sick with worry, rushes to the hospital but is too late: his mother had died only minutes earlier.

Ratna's double-dealing is now revealed to him, and in his despair and sorrow he decides to wreak his vengeance on her. Just as he is about to strangle her, he hears the voice of his mother: "Even if I die, you must live, my son!" And he stays his hand. The original story and the scenario were both the work of Ramanathan, who in this moving tribute to the wisdom of a mother's love developed a plot which went on to show how in the end Ratna met her just desserts and how the faithful Hamidah was at last reunited with Raimi.

It is clear why Ramanathan was such an asset to the Shaw brothers. In addition to making films that respected a tight

schedule and were completed within the budget, he had the gift of choosing subjects that were shrewdly calculated to have mass appeal at the box-office. *Panggilan Pulau* (1954), the last film he made with Ramlee, had all the right ingredients: mutiny on the high seas, a spectacular storm, a shipwreck, exotic locations, buried treasure, warlike tribes, a sensational duel, and, running like a silver thread throughout the narrative, a story of conflicting love interests. Ramlee was the young Zulkifli, who, having fallen foul of his masters, leaves his *kampung* determined that he will only come back as a man of wealth and position.

His adventures begin on a merchant ship where the crew has mutinied and has thrown the rightful captain into the ship's dungeon. Zulkifli learns from the captain about an island called Kazambo where a rich treasure lies concealed. The ship is wrecked in a mighty storm and Zulkifli and a few others are swept onto an island which, he later discovers, is none other than Kazambo. A fierce tribe of islanders surrounds them threatening death, but he is able to persuade them that he and his mates are not out to cause trouble. Moreover, the headman's daughter Melati (Latifah Omar) has fallen in love with him, although he remains faithful to his childhood sweetheart Jelita (Normadiyah) whom he has left in his home village. He does not know that in his absence Jelita has been forced to marry another man.

Plans are made to dig up the treasure which has lain buried for years in a sacred cave on the island. Zulkifli's companions turn traitors and plot among themselves to seize the treasure and rule the island themselves. When Zulkifli hears of their treacherous plan he fights a battle with them. He gains the upper hand, but the headman decrees that he must once more fight the leader of the betrayers, this time in the sea. A breathtaking duel in the teeming waves then follows. Although he is

wounded, Zulkifli triumphs and leaves the island with his agreed share of the treasure. He returns to his native *kampung* as he had planned, a rich man and looking forward to marrying Jelita. But when he finds that she is already married, he hears the call of the island of Kazambo and goes back there to be reunited with his lover Melati.

This exciting adventure story provided Ramlee with the chance to display his substantial qualities. Given the opportunity of emulating his early screen heroes Tom Mix and Buck Jones, he strode through the film with heroic vigour and demonstrated his skill at fight scenes with all the ease and glamour of a Douglas Fairbanks. This was what his audience loved, and he gave it to them in full measure. He was on the side of good against evil, and although the forces ranged in opposition to him were tough and resolute, he fought a clean fight and won through by honest means. A member of the supporting cast needs to be mentioned here. When an unscrupulous pirate tries to stab Zulkifli, he is protected and saved by a short but wiry friend. This turns out to be Ibrahim Pendek, an actor from Perak recently engaged by the Shaw brothers.

The film takes its basic plot from an episode in the classic English novel *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë's passionate romance set in the Yorkshire moors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The leading male character, a gypsy orphan, runs away from home for an unspecified foreign country where he is supposed to have made his fortune. On his return to England, a rich man, he finds that his childhood sweetheart, whom he deeply adores, has married someone else. He elopes with her cousin, but when his first love dies he subsequently longs for death, which finally comes to reunite him with her. *Panggilan Pulau* eliminates the tragedy of the plot and shows the hero (P. Ramlee) leaving home and discovering buried treasure on the island. When, on coming home, he finds

that his lady love has married someone else, he returns to the island and is reunited with the girl (Latifah Omar) whose affections he has won.

Ramlee and Ramanathan remained close friends until 1957, when the latter, having distinguished himself at MFP, returned to India and continued his career there. Another Indian director who worked with Ramlee was K.M. Basker. He had been a fellow member with L. Krishnan in the Indian National Army at Singapore and had also been active with him in Madras, where they both belonged to the Congress movement. Krishnan invited his friend to Singapore and the MFP in 1952, the year in which Basker teamed up with Ramlee for *Patab Hati*. The "broken heart" of the title belongs to the heroine Rahimah (Neng Yatimah) whose love for Kasim (Ramlee) is lifelong but, in the event, doomed. This film, in utter contrast to the high jinks of *Panggilan Pulau*, is a movingly sentimental study of the conflict between gratitude for kindness received and the prompting of the heart. Kasim is the son of a poor family, a brainy young man who owes his university education to the generosity of a rich estate owner. This generosity, however, is not entirely disinterested, since the young man's patron hopes that Kasim will marry his daughter. Unfortunately Kasim has already met and fallen deeply in love with the pretty florist Rahimah in Singapore. Both his father and his patron are annoyed that Kasim is reluctant to become the latter's son-in-law—indeed, Kasim's father, whose health is frail, becomes so ill at his son's behaviour that Kasim buckles under and works in his patron's Kuala Lumpur factory. His thoughts, though, are still in Singapore with Rahimah.

His father watches him carefully and intercepts the letters Rahimah writes to him. The old man then meets her alone, explains the situation, and begs her not to see Kasim again. Reluctantly, she sees that she is standing in the way of Kasim's suc-



P. Ramlee and Rokiah



P. Ramlee and Rosnani in *Miskin* (1952)



P. Ramlee and Latifah Omar



P. Ramlee (left) and Haji Mahadi in *Ibu* (1953)

cess, and vanishes from the young man's life. She leaves him a letter asking him to forget her. Against his will he marries the bride chosen for him. The years pass. He has sons and grows old. By chance, one day in Penang, he comes across Rahimah again. They hold hands in silence. They have, says Kasim, wasted their youth and life through an old man's wish. He has lost her once, but now that he has found her he is determined never to lose her again. They go back to Kuala Lumpur where she lives secretly as his mistress. His son, believing that she covets his father's wealth, confronts her and upbraids her in violent language. Kasim overhears and quietly rebukes him by pointing out that he and his mother owe Rahimah everything, and that, but for her self-sacrifice, he would not have been born. Kasim's wife promises to be kind to Rahimah. Nevertheless, the heavy strain of this emotional scene ruins Kasim's health, already fragile, and he dies peacefully. So, too, does Rahimah, her heart broken by the news of her lover's death.

The generally favourable reception accorded to *Patah Hati* was marred by one dissonant note. A critic wrote: "As usual, local films place more emphasis on songs and dances. P. Ramlee's songs and 'Hindustani' style make him, the leading actor in the film, appear very stiff in acting the role of someone who has aged more than twenty years since the time of his marriage".

The other Ramlee film directed by K.M. Basker was *Miskin*, also in 1952. As the title indicates, the theme involved the clash between poverty and wealth. Ramlee was the humble car washer who falls in love with the daughter of his rich employer. The strong cast included Rosnani, the talented and attractive actress who had come from her native Sumatra a few years previously to work in Singapore and who had earlier appeared with Ramlee in *Ibu*. Another member of the cast was the talented Jamil Sulong (now Datuk), her husband in real life,

actor and author of many accomplished lyrics to music by Ramlee.

Miskin was to mark yet another advance in P. Ramlee's acting technique. There were those who held the view that it would be very difficult for him to surpass his performance in *Penghidupan*. The screening of *Miskin* was, however, to prove them wrong. As a matter of fact, the quality of his acting in *Miskin* was better than in *Penghidupan*, notably in the very effective love scene with Jamilah (Rosnani).

Over a period of six years Basker made fourteen films for MFP before going over to their rivals Cathay-Keris where he directed five more. Immediately after *Miskin*, Ramlee's next film was *Putus Harapan* (1953), again supervised by an Indian director, this time a veteran of Tamil cinema called B.N. Rao. He was of Malayali origins and had entered the film business way back in 1926 as an actor. Seven years later he directed his first film, the Hindi *Kimti Qurbani*, and from then onwards developed a highly successful career working in films throughout India. The Shaw brothers made him an offer at a time when Tamil cinema was in the doldrums, and he eagerly accepted a three-year contract for Singapore. He liked what he found there. By contrast with Indian studios then, where the atmosphere was happy-go-lucky and where films seemed to emerge more by chance than by design, the Singapore company was based on strict Hollywood principles. This imposed a schedule of three months' actual shooting with each day regularly completed and followed by a month of post-production, all systematically planned and budgeted in advance.

Under these congenial circumstances Rao directed a series of half a dozen films which are among some of the best Ramlee ever made. The first, in 1953, was *Putus Harapan*, a drama of family relationships. Ramlee played Yusuf, the orphan who is fostered by the wealthy and benevolent factory owner Hashim.

The latter's death leaves Yusuf at the mercy of Hashim's avaricious widow, and she, despite the youth's brilliant promise as a student, makes him her household servant. At the same time her own son, a ne'er do well, gets into deep financial trouble and is only rescued from it when his sister Fatimah dutifully agrees to marry the erstwhile friend who is suing him for large debts. Yusuf, meanwhile, who is in love with her, gives up any hope of winning her favour, leaves the house and embarks on a promising career elsewhere. Before the unwilling marriage into which she has been forced by her mother, however, Fatimah sickens and dies, despairing of ever again seeing her cherished foster-brother Yusuf.

In some respects, *Putus Harapan* was accused of wounding Islamic sensibilities. Exception was taken to the indiscriminating manner in which the director had presented the love scene between two under-aged children. When, for example, the little girl said to the little boy: "Yusuf, look at my face. Yusuf, smile", the audience laughed at seeing children of such a tender age who were supposed to have already learnt to express deep feelings and to do so idiomatically. More seriously, there was an episode which was wholly contradictory to the customs of the Malays and of Islam. This concerned the dead body of Fatimah (Rokiah). After her death Yusuf (P. Ramlee), who had been looking after her, cradled the body in his arms and carried it outside the house to a place he did not know. The act of carrying a corpse aimlessly as shown amounted to harming the body and was considered disrespectful to the dead person. Fatimah died in her own home. Why, then, should Yusuf carry her body far away from the house?

The film that followed *Putus Harapan* was entitled *Hujan Panas* (1953) and enabled P. Ramlee to display both his musical and dramatic talents to the full. The plot varied between tragedy and comedy, just as the weather veers between periods of

dark rain and bright sunshine, whence the title. Ramlee was Amir, a humble restaurant waiter consumed with ambitions to be a famous composer. He loves the waitress Aminah who sings his songs in the restaurant but who does not return his affection. Eventually they marry and she bears a son, although she is still cold towards her besotted husband. Although Amir does not know it, he is loved in secret by Hasnah, a fellow worker in the restaurant. Amir gradually wins fame and prosperity as a composer. Despite his success, however, Aminah leaves him and, accompanied by the small son, goes to live with the man she really loves. The latter deserts her when they run into money troubles, and she tries, unsuccessfully, to earn her living as a singer. Her son dies. She wanders distractedly beside a railtrack and is killed by an oncoming train. Whereupon the long-suffering Hasnah declares her love to Amir and the pair of them recover in time for a happy ending. "Patience," observes Hasnah, somewhat heartlessly, "is truly the mother of virtue."

Aminah was played by the enchanting Siput Sarawak, and, given her liquid eyes and her voluptuous figure swathed in a *sarung kebaya* with the "sweetheart" necklines, it was easy to see why she should so enchant the hero of the film. When she sang (or, rather, lip-synched) "Tiru Macham Saya", and danced seductively to its inviting measures, she personified the good advice of the lyric which advised women on the importance of keeping a good figure to prevent their husbands from straying. Indeed, it was not only the women in the film who dressed well. The men, also, wore smart clothes, white tuxedos and bowties with a formal elegance that seems to have been lost these days. Ramlee himself had some delightful numbers to put over, among them "Mari Dengar ini Cherita", a comic mixture of Malay and English, in which, performing a sort of Charlie Chaplin dance, he sang about a husband roughed up by his

jealous wife who had discovered tell-tale lipstick marks on his face. In between verses he spoke a warning that jealousy was blind and did not bother to check first of all whether, in fact, a husband had been unfaithful. That, he moralised, was the danger of jealousy. More romantically, he sang the languid "Merak Kayangan", where he compared the haughty Aminah with the beautiful peacock, a creature noted for its pride and arrogance. So, even though the storm clouds of *hujan* (rain) brought desertion by his wife and the death of his small son, the *panas* (the heat) brought in the end material success and a happy second marriage. This mixture of sorrow and happiness was blended with a skill and charm which left audiences pleasantly satisfied.

Publicity for the next film made by Ramlee and B.N. Rao took an unusual line. "Due to the tremendous length (13,795 feet) of the picture," it announced, "please note revised times." The movie was, indeed, a bumper package. "Surpassing all other Malay pictures comes this, the latest and greatest of all!" filmgoers were assured. Rao had crammed into the story of *Siapa Salah* (1953) all the elements which had made *Hujan Panas* so great a success at the box-office plus several more. Ramlee was Jamil, son of a rich father, who falls in love with a servant's daughter, Noorma (played by Normadiyah). One day, suffering from a headache, Jamil retires to his room and is tended by Noorma. Although they are innocent of any wrongdoing, his father, a devout Muslim, is outraged by the incident and dismisses Noorma and her mother from the house. Jamil also leaves in search of Noorma, finds her, marries her, has a child by her, and settles down to domestic life. He is an artist and supports the family by selling pictures. But his eyes become overstrained and he goes blind. Noorma is obliged to work as a waitress and is lusted after by Saleh, one of the customers. Fortunately, her guardian angel, Aziz, another frequenter of the café, an honourable and educated man, protects her from

Saleh's importuning. Jamil misreads the situation, assumes that Aziz is her lover, and leaves home for ever. In the course of this densely-layered plot, Saleh attempts to seduce her and is accidentally killed when she defends herself. On her appearance at the murder trial, who should the judge turn out to be but the kindly Aziz? Knowing the background to the case, he clears Noorma of the charge, helps her find Jamil who has taken refuge in a poor people's home, recommends a doctor who will cure Jamil's blindness, and reunites the couple with their small son. Of the songs which Ramlee composed for this film, perhaps "Sunyi dan Senyap" strikes one most forcibly as an expression of the loneliness suffered by the hero, both from blindness and from being denied, however temporarily, the solace of wife and child.

Perjodohan (1953) the next collaboration between Rao and Ramlee, had an equally devious plot lightened up with touches of humour. It was especially notable for its musical content. The three songs Ramlee composed were linked to the story with more ingenuity than usual and arose naturally from the development of the plot. "Mengapa Riang Ria" was sung as a duet by Ramlee and his co-star Normadiah. There was a richness, a wistful charm in "Hujan di Tengah Hari" which only Ramlee knew how to express in his dark brown voice, while "Sungguh Malangnya Nasib-ku" with its relaxed tempo was perfectly placed at a crucial point in the narrative.

In 1954, a year later, came *Merana*, a darkly dramatic story in which the hero's dilemma concentrates the action with a power that Rao and his leading man had rarely achieved before. Ramlee was Amin, son of a widow in a village near Ipoh. She hopes he will marry his cousin (Mariani). Instead, he marries another girl (Latifah Omar), a choice which means he is trapped in the cross-fire from his disappointed mother on the one hand, and on the other, his venomous aunt, who, still keen

for him to marry her own daughter, poisons his mother's mind against the new bride. The subsequent machinations of the two unscrupulous women destroy the couple's happiness and drive the girl to death. Unable to bear any more the sorrows which have befallen him, Amin bids farewell to the world and leaves his mother to repent her wickedness alone. In a cast distinguished for the dramatic strength of its acting, with Ramlee particularly convincing in his anguish at being torn between two conflicting forces, Siti Tanjong Perak gave a daunting portrayal of his formidable mother.

The last film which Rao and Ramlee made together was an extravaganza which, in its brio and inventiveness, provided a gorgeous climax to their efforts. *Abu Hassan Panchuri* (1955) derived from the *Arabian Nights*, a favoured source with Indian film directors when looking for a subject. It also had parallels with Alexander Korda's fantastic *The Thief of Baghdad* which featured the Indian star Sabu in a role similar to that of Ramlee. The latter is Abu Hassan, youthful, blithe, dashing, who with his cronies picks pockets and snaps up unguarded valuables in the crowded marketplace. One day, as they are about their dubious business, a beautiful princess (Faridah) passes through in ceremonial procession. Abu Hassan falls in love at first sight and declares, among jeers from his mates, that he will have her as his wife. How will he break into the heavily guarded palace where she lives?

He robs a sorcerer of a magic wand that can make ropes stand up straight into the air. At night, outside the palace wall, he ascends the rope and drops into her room. There he charms her with his sweet talk and persuades her to meet him for another date in the palace gardens, the setting for an affectionate duet between them. Her father the Caliph (Daeng Idris) has other plans for her, however, and invites to his palace all the princes from neighbouring kingdoms so that she may choose a

suitor from among them. The guests include an evil magician (Nordin Ahmad) masquerading as the Prince of Tartar, who brings with him as a present for the Caliph a horse that can fly. Meanwhile Abu Hassan has been caught trespassing in the palace and is exiled into the desert by the Caliph. The magician, rebuffed by the princess when he asks her to marry him, turns her into a bird, abducts her and bears her away on the flying horse. The Caliph offers her hand in marriage to whomsoever rescues his daughter. Alone in the desert wastes, Abu Hassan finds a bottle whence he conjures up a mighty genie who restores him to his friends in Baghdad. A kindly witch tells him where the princess is imprisoned, and, with the aid of a magic carpet, the hero flies to her rescue, duels with the magician and runs him through in an epic sword fight. The Caliph duly honours his promise and blesses the marriage of Abu Hassan to his daughter.

Technically the film has its faults. The scenes of the flying horse are clumsily managed, and the substitution of the dummy for the real-life animal is only too obvious. Likewise, although the sorcerer's rope shoots up and remains aloft with no visible means of support, the magic carpet is plainly a matter of Abu Hassan and his friends perching themselves on an undulating base while back-projection creates an impression of passing clouds. Yet the audience willingly overlooks these flaws in its enjoyment of the players' wholehearted dedication to the story and their unflagging energy in telling the tale for all it is worth. You believe in Ramlee's cheeky rascal, applaud his hare-brained scheme to marry the princess, and admire the nonchalant determination that carries him through to eventual triumph. B.N. Rao keeps up the pace all the way through, and the songs and dances give an attractive flavour of *bangsawan* charmingly distilled in cinematic terms. *Abu Hassan Penchuri* is perhaps the best of the fairy-tale films Ramlee ever made.

By the time B.N. Rao had directed nine films in three years for MFP, his contract was due for renewal. Uncharacteristically, the Shaw brothers refused to increase his salary. He bought his return ticket to India and refused an offer from Cathay-Keris which amounted to three times his pay. Cathay-Keris persisted and eventually tempted him into their fold where he remained for the next seven and highly successful years. The Indian tradition at MFP was kept up by Phani Majumdar who took his place there in 1956. On his arrival in Singapore he was commissioned to reorganise the studio system and also to direct a major new production called *Hang Tuah* (1956).

The source of *Hang Tuah* was the book by Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard, an Anglo-Irishman who spent the greater part of his life in Malaya as a member of the Malayan Civil Service. After Independence in 1957 he stayed on, converted to Islam and took out Malayan citizenship, despite having inherited a castle in Ireland which he eventually sold. He survived gruelling experiences as a prisoner of war at Changi and played an important role during the Emergency. His death in 1994 at the age of eighty-nine brought to an end a lifelong love affair with his adoptive country. This "unorthodox civil servant", as he described himself, was passionately interested in Malay history and culture, helped set up both the National Archives and the National Museum, and worked vigorously for charitable organisations. He wrote many publications about the Malay heritage.

The Shaw brothers put aside a budget reckoned at a million dollars or so to make what they planned to be a sensational box-office draw. Here black-and-white photography would not do, they resolved, and only expensive Eastmancolour would do justice to the hero's adventures. Inevitably, they cast their biggest star in the part, and Ramlee was in turn partnered by the ravishing Saadiah. He, of course, played Hang Tuah, the

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE IMMORTAL
MALAY WARRIOR OF MALACCA
BROUGHT TO THE SCREEN FOR THE
FIRST TIME!

HANG

STARRING
P. RAMLEE
SA'ADIAH
AHMAD MAHMUD
HAJI MAHADI
DAENG IDRIS
and introducing
ZAITUN

TUAH



Directed
by
PHANI MAJUMBAR

Produced by
MALAY FILM PRODUCTIONS
Released & Dist. by **SHAW BRICKS**





P. Ramlee (left) and Ahmad Mahmud in *Hang Tuah* (1956)

son of a humble Malacca shopkeeper who dreamed that the moon fell on his head as a sign that his son would be a great man. Hang Tuah first appears in the film leading a group of four adventurous youths. Their initial exploit is to defeat with their superior cunning a ferocious gang of pirates in the Straits of Malacca. Then they journey to the top of Gunung Ledang where they learn the art of *keris* fighting from Guru Adi Petra (Hashim Noor). On their return, fortified with their newly learned skills, they save their native town from destruction by three men who have run amok. The fight scenes, all flailing arms and legs and whirling *keris* drenched in fountains of blood, were the most spectacular ever seen in Malay films. As a reward for his bravery, Hang Tuah is recruited into the Sultan's service.

Here he finds himself in a bizarre world of its own. In the fifteenth century, the Malay Empire was at the height of its glory. Imperial Malacca, which then reigned over the entire peninsula, was a rich and powerful seaport which stood at the crossroads of the Orient. Here came ships loaded with precious merchandise from the Spice Islands, from distant Cathay and from the Red Sea. Here they traded and paid tribute to the mighty Sultan who held the golden key to the Straits of Malacca. The court, decadent and corrupt, was the scene of Byzantine intrigues among traders, ambassadors and officials. Into this den of conspirators and sycophants erupted a man of different stamp, the incorruptible warrior Hang Tuah.

Phani Majumdar's screenplay told the well-known story of how Hang Tuah placed his sword at the service of the Sultan and battled valiantly with the intrigues of his enemies. Against the majestic background of ancient Malacca is pictured the rise of the shopkeeper's son to warrior statesman and the highest position in the land. Graphic and fast-moving episodes depicted his wars, his loves and his adventures in distant coun-

tries, his constant struggle against enemies at home and abroad, and his ultimate triumph over the forces of evil. This, the most ambitious film yet made by MFP, also assembled one of the most remarkable casts. Ramlee was surrounded by a company of brilliant players. It included Ahmad Mahmud from Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, who had already embarked on his distinguished career in the cinema. Another actor of natural authority was Daeng Idris who played the Sultan's Prime Minister. Strong support came from the Indonesian-born Mustarjo, an experienced figure in the world of *bangsawan* and Malay opera, while Haji Mahadi played a Sultan of unassailable dignity. The actresses comprised some of MFP's most attractive charmers. The Singaporean Zaiton had already adorned *Abu Hassan Penchuri* with her little-girl sweetness. Her allies were the gorgeous Saadiah, who as a girl of thirteen had appeared with Ramlee in *Bakti*; Siti Tanjong Perak, a frequent member of the cast in fifteen of Ramlee's films; and Mariani, whom Ramlee had persuaded to change her name from Maria, deeming it not exotic enough for film posters.

Among the four young men who shared in Hang Tuah's adventures was Aziz Sattar (Hang Lekiu). He was to become a close friend of Ramlee, whom he first met in 1953 on the set of *Putus Harapan*. A native of Surabaya, third of ten children in the family, he emigrated to Singapore where his father went in search of better job prospects. His schooling was cut short by the Japanese invasion and he had to earn money by cutting grass and selling cakes. After the Japanese surrender in 1945 he worked as a labourer under the British Military Administration and then as a driver with the Qantas airline. His ambitions lay elsewhere, however. As a boy of eight he had learned to dance the *zapin* and often performed it at weddings. Later, in his teens, he became a *keroncong* singer with Radio Malaya. In between he joined MFP as an odd-job boy at the studios in

Jalan Ampas, sweeping the floor, rolling the film, and sometimes, dubbing. Gradually he realised that his true talent was for comedy, and, having won a "Best Comedian" contest in 1950, he pestered his employers for an opportunity to act. His chance came in *Putus Harapan*, where he figured as an extra. The promise he showed was confirmed by his performance as Hang Lekiu in *Hang Tuah*.

There are critics who said that the tone of the songs written by P. Ramlee for *Hang Tuah* was Hindustani. Authoritative historians are of the opinion that by the time of *Hang Tuah* Hindu influences had been firmly planted in the Malay spirit. Such was the case with Arab songs which circulated at the same time as Spanish and Portuguese songs from India. This being so, it would seem that during the *Hang Tuah* era it was possible to hear Hindustani songs as well as songs of Spanish and Portuguese origin. It was indeed a pity, remarked another critic, that because the director was an Indian and the star was P. Ramlee, the film could more appropriately be entitled "The Singing Hang Tuah".

The next production associating Ramlee and Phani Majumdar was to be their last. By contrast with the exotic cloak-and-dagger adventures of *Hang Tuah*, *Anak-ku Sazali* (1956) was a low-key domestic drama. It featured Ramlee as Hassan, a penniless domestic servant who also happens to be a gifted natural musician. Sacked by his employer, he decides to leave his *kampung* and takes with him his childhood sweetheart Mahani (Zaiton). They arrive in Singapore, marry and produce a son whom they call Sazali. Hassan, by now a successful musician, resolves that his beloved son will have everything that was denied him in his own difficult childhood. He adores the boy and intends to live his life through him all over again. Kindly, even indulgent, he watches Sazali grow up and does all he can to smooth his path, although in the process he only succeeds in



P. Ramlee and Zaiton in *Anak-ku Sazali* (1956)

spoiling him. The boy matures into a selfish egoist who breaks the heart of his fiancée and soon becomes one of the most notorious gangsters in Singapore. In the course of an unsuccessful armed robbery he is wounded and hunted by the police. One evening, as his father Hassan stands on the balcony of his house watching a violent thunderstorm that is raging outside, there comes a ring at the doorbell. He opens the door to find Sazali, a hunted man begging for shelter. Hassan takes him in and give him food. The urgent dilemma now arises: does his love for Sazali blind his sense of justice and urge him to help the young man escape, or does he do his duty and hand his beloved son over to the police?

Whereas in *Hang Tuah* Ramlee played his role with broad swashbuckling strokes, in *Anak-ku Sazali* he was called upon to portray characters in delicate, subtle half-tones. He filled, moreover, two parts: that of the father Hassan and that of the son Sazali. It was a virtuoso performance and one of his finest achievements as an actor, balancing the doting father against the spoilt, tearaway son. He also sang, with Normadiyah dubbing Zaiton, several numbers he composed for the film, among them the beguiling "Joget Si Pinang Muda" and "Itulah Sayang". On his own he rendered "Anak-ku Sazali" as the captivating title song. The film was, in short, a triumphant demonstration of all his talents. He was backed by a strong cast which also included Rosnani, Nordin Ahmad and Daeng Idris.

After making *Hang Tuah* Phani Majumdar contemplated returning to India. He had shot the film in only four weeks, working tirelessly into the early hours of the morning every day. The Shaw brothers persuaded him to stay on for another five years, during which time he made eleven films. He only left Singapore for good in 1959, despite having been offered citizenship within the newly independent Federation of Malaya. As an Indian national he did not feel at ease in the postcolonial

atmosphere. He left behind him the legend of a dedicated worker who drove himself and his staff so single-mindedly that one day his cameraman actually fell asleep while adjusting the lens.

Hang Tuah, with its exciting spectacle, its flamboyant acting, its lively songs and dances, has long since become a classic of the Malay cinema. It makes a fitting climax to the work of the six Indian directors who made the late 1940s and early 1950s a time of heroic endeavour and a golden age of Malay films. Between 1948 and 1956 Ramlee starred in twenty-six features under their direction. Thanks to them he was able to build on what he had learned from his early experience and to emerge as an all-round man of the cinema thoroughly versed in the art of scripting, directing, cutting, editing, acting, lighting, and all the manifold techniques that go to make up the process of turning an original idea into a story told in moving pictures on a screen. What is more, he now possessed an intimate knowledge of the craftsmanship required for every type of film—comedy, tragedy, drama, spectacle, farce, romance and fantasy.

One more name should be added to the list of Indian filmmakers who schooled and influenced Ramlee. Although it is doubtful if Ramlee ever met him, Satyajit Ray set an example which he admired and to some extent followed. The Calcutta-born Ray was a commercial artist who took a lively interest in the cinema. Encouraged by his acquaintance with the French director Jean Renoir who had visited India to make *The River*, he set out on an amateur basis to film a Bengali novel called *Pather Panchali*. His method was neo-realistic, in that he used a non-professional cast in natural surroundings. Despite the lack of financial backing and the length of time that it took, his film was internationally acclaimed and enabled him to work henceforward as a professional director. *Pather Panchali* ("Little Song

of the Road") told the story of a boy growing up in a world where social change was rapidly taking place. It is a trilogy which chronicles the evolution of a traditional rural family as a result of the migration from country to town. Ray's other films continued the theme of a changing Indian society. Among his other subjects were the land owner who has outlived the society in which he was once an important figure (*Jalsaghar*), the conflict between superstition and modern free-thinking (*Deni*), the problem of a wife torn between her traditional role and the urge to build a career for herself (*Mahanagar*), and the relationship between men and women (*Aranyer Din Ratri*). All these topics gave Ramlee food for thought, as Malaya at the time was itself approaching an era of social change, and Ray's treatment of them indicated new avenues of approach. What is more, the unusually talented Ray was, like Ramlee, to write the musical scores of his new films.

There remained, however, in addition to the Indians from whom he had learned so much, another source which was also to inspire and enlighten Ramlee. As a boy he had admired such obvious heroes as Charlie Chaplin and Buck Jones. As he grew up and began to take a more informed view of the cinema he found himself coming more and more under the spell of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. One of the few Japanese to have achieved fame in the international cinema, Kurosawa, like Ray, began life as a commercial artist, sure indication of a strong visual sense. After becoming an assistant film director and writing screenplays he came into his own as a fully-fledged director and had made a dozen films before *Rashomon* (1951) brought him worldwide fame. Ramlee was among those to be deeply impressed by the film, which, recalling the Italian dramatist Pirandello who also explored the same theme, investigated the thin line which divides appearance from reality. A woman is raped and murdered. Four conflicting accounts are

given of the incident, each account entirely believable. But which is the true one and which are the fake? Or is there yet another untold account which will tell us what really happened? The crux of the film is that the audience is left to make up its mind, and Ramlee was not alone in pondering the brilliance of the director.

Equally impressive was the epic *Seven Samurai*, in which a small village attacked by marauding bandits commissions seven mercenaries to defend it. Regarded as Kurosawa's masterpiece, the three-hour film enthralled audiences with its inspired camerawork and exhilarating rhythms. Ramlee was among those who appreciated the bold sweep of the narrative and the visual dexterity that filled every frame with a compelling power. The influence of *Seven Samurai* was broad and long-lived. Hollywood paid it tribute with *The Magnificent Seven*, with Sergio Leone's "Spaghetti Westerns", and, it might be added in later years, with *A Bug's Life*. Yet if Hollywood films were to show obvious indebtedness to Kurosawa, he in turn was not immune to Western ideas. He openly acknowledged as a model John Ford's classic westerns and, indeed, Shakespeare, whose *Macbeth* he rendered as *Throne of Blood* and whose *King Lear* he transformed into the mediaeval *Ran*. We therefore have a rich and fascinating blend of influences which, through Ramlee, were to be imported into Malay films.

A number of films directed by Ramlee follow the example of Satyajit Ray in their treatment of social problems. They focus on matters such as the clash between the system of arranged marriages and the prompting of true love. Other films he made were to be based on similar dilemmas. They studied the opposing forces in Malay society of wealth and poverty, of social ambition and personal feelings, and the struggle of poor but talented young men to make their way against snobbery and prejudice. Ray's emphasis on realism and "natural" acting

as opposed to the tradition of *bangsawan* which had transferred to early Malay cinema, was to be taken up and developed by Ramlee in some of the most thoughtful films he made as director.

Malays at that time may have been poor but they were rich in the history of their glorious past. Naturally they loved films like *Hang Tuah* which portrayed the splendours of the Malacca court and the gallant exploits of their heroes. It was a form of escapism for them. Nearly all of the films in which P. Ramlee appeared became box-office hits. Malay audiences adored his acting, his looks, his pleasant smile and personality, and his very melodious singing voice. His strength lay in his ability to play the part of the hero who can captivate his lover, not so much by means of smiles and gestures as by his wooing the loved one with songs and dances. In many of the films he played the romantic young hero who finally wins the heart of his lady after various trials, including hand-hand fighting in particular, and courting the object of his affections with songs. The Malays in those days were very fond of movies with a love story. For the film fan, the P. Ramlee who appeared on the screen was not P. Ramlee "the film star" but the reflection of the fan himself as he would like to have been in the character P. Ramlee was acting. In short, the all-engrossing dream of his fans was to fall in love like P. Ramlee himself.

As Jamil Sulong has pointed out (*Kaca Permata: Memoir Seorang Pengarah*, 1990): "It is also due to the influence of Hindi films that many local actors imitated the acting styles of the artistes, so much so that when an actor played the part of a villain he would sport a moustache and put on a chequered shirt of the sort worn by actors in Indian films at the time. The Indian actors in turn had copied the styles of villains in cowboy 'Westerns'. P. Ramlee himself at first imitated, whether delib-



Raj Kapoor



Marlon Brando



Stewart Granger



Akira Kurosawa



P. Ramlee



P. Ramlee

erately or not, the acting styles of Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor."

Another Ramlee production which recalled Kurosawa was the heroic *Sergeant Hassan*. The exoticism which the Japanese director had found for himself in *samurai* history was discovered by Ramlee in Malay folklore. This was not the only heritage bequeathed by Kurosawa. His preoccupation with romance and social divisiveness was also to be taken up by his Malay admirer.

Such were the directors who served as models for Ramlee the film-maker. As an actor he was to find inspiration in an American player whose technique brought something entirely new to the screen in the 1950s. We have seen that when a boy Ramlee delighted in the exploits of Tarzan, Buck Jones and Charlie Chaplin. In his maturity he came to admire most of all the acting of Marlon Brando. Despite the unevenness of his talent, Brando impressed by the sheer power and energy of his acting. The "Method" which he imported from the theatre came to full bloom in the cinema. Half articulate, brooding, rebellious, muttering angrily, he sketched a towering figure in *On the Waterfront*. As the ageing Mafia chief in *The Godfather*, he convincingly portrayed a devious old man. Perhaps most daring of all, he depicted middle-aged sex in *Last Tango in Paris*. These characteristics were to inspire Ramlee the actor in his portrayals of modern heroes, hinted at, lightly but indelibly sketched, as he himself progressed from youth to middle age.

Chapter 5

THE LOVER— ONSCREEN AND OFF

MALAYS are very sensitive to beauty. They like romance as well, and these are two of the reasons why P. Ramlee's films were so successful. Cinemagoers enjoyed seeing him fall in love with beautiful women on the screen. The men imagined themselves as the hero, handsome, and inevitably irresistible to women. So deep was the impression he made on younger Malays that they grew moustaches like his, trained their hair into quiffs like his, and sought as far as possible to emulate their idol, at least where appearance was concerned. Women saw the heroine as an idealised version of themselves, lovely and much courted.

In the course of his films, Ramlee was to woo and win some thirty of the most beautiful Malay film stars, among them Siput Sarawak, Kasma Booty, Mariam, Latifah Omar, Sarimah and Saloma. Despite competition from other good-looking actors such as Osman Gumanti, Ahmad Mahmud, Roomai Noor and Yusof Latiff, it was Ramlee who caused the hearts of women to beat fastest of all. His appeal went far beyond the

limits of Malaya and Singapore to reach Indonesia, where he enjoyed even greater celebrity than many homegrown stars.

Few women can have been serenaded so elegantly as the leading ladies in Ramlee's films. Not only did he perform heroic deeds on their behalf and charm them with his smile and manner, but he also melted their hearts with persuasive melodies. He must, indeed, have been the only screen idol in the world to have captivated the ladies with songs that he had himself composed, played and sang. The songs have unique figurations and chorus which are essentially Malay. Only a Malay born and bred can give the fullest and most sympathetic interpretation of such typical songs as "Getaran Jiwa", "Tidur-lah Permaisuri", "Hamidah", "Jeritan Batin-ku", "Entah di Mana", "Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang", "Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti", and dozens more. The music Ramlee made was by no means limited to the voice alone and the discreet accompaniment of his chosen instrument, violin, piano or guitar. The romantic longing he enshrined in melody was also expressed through graceful dances and in witty *pantun* that immortalised the beloved.

Yet he was not just a man of beguiling words and tunes. He was a true hero who faced up to and overcame both physical dangers and the machinations of villains. Whether the film was a drama or a comedy, he threw himself into action without flinching and battled his way through to eventual triumph. Malay audiences liked a hero, and P. Ramlee was the embodiment of heroism. It pleases them to think that, if exposed to the same trials endured by Ramlee, they too would emerge victorious. As a warrior in history, as an army officer, as a businessman, as a doctor, as a struggling musician, as a humble rickshaw driver even, he fought against the odds and conquered circumstances which had at first seemed invincible.

A procession of beautiful women made their way as his co-stars in film after film. Some, indeed, had been beauty queens before they ever appeared on the screen. Vera Wee, who starred with him in *Sesudah Subuh* (1967) when she was twenty-five years old, had won beauty competitions in Singapore and Malaysia. The fairy princess in *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (1958) was Marion Willis, a graceful model from the Joan Booty Mannequin School. Pretty Maria Menado, co-star of *Penghidupan*, was later to make film history as the first woman producer in the country. After a successful decade as actress she set up, in 1960, her own production firm and so pioneered the way for women to operate behind the camera. Just as dazzling a combination of beauty and brains was Siput Sarawak, who had made her debut in *Chinta* and was to fulfil her glowing promise in *Nasib, Nilam, Rachun Dunia* and *Bakti*. She then aspired to be the first Malay woman director and worked on a script she had also written. Unfortunately, strong objections from the Cathay-Keris Workers Union blighted the project and she was obliged to play the lead role under direction by Hussin Haniff. The compromise was not successful.

Siput Sarawak was not, however, the only leading lady of Ramlee's to possess a talent for direction as well as for acting. Saadiah was another, and, after her precocious appearance at the age of thirteen in *Bakti*, she went on to star in a dozen or so films with Ramlee during the 1950s. By 1980 the wind of change had veered so much that she was able to emerge as fully fledged director of the film *Ceritaku Ceritamu* and to cast in the leading role her own daughter, Fauziah Ahmad Daud. Rosnani, wife of Jamil Sulong, also travelled along this path. It is clear that Ramlee's leading ladies could lay claim to intellectual and managerial talents as well as to lovely looks.

An aura surrounded the woman stars who enjoyed the attention of Ramlee on the screen. It was created by the studios

who shaped not only their work but also their lives off the film set. At all times they looked elegant and well dressed in public, even though they may just have happened to call in at the studio for an off-duty chat or meal with a colleague. Under no circumstance were they allowed to be seen eating at roadside stalls. Anyone who did so received a sharply worded memo reminding them of the duty to do nothing that would harm the glamour so carefully nurtured by the studio. If a famous Hollywood celebrity came visiting, the stars were given a hair and make-up allowance and dispatched to welcome the guest at the airport. When they attended a film festival the studio paid for new outfits of clothing. Every Saturday when new films were screened they received a fee for turning up at the cinema. Thanks to such discipline stars like Kasma Booty, Saadiah, Mariam, Latifah Omar, Hashimah Yon, Rosnani, Normadiah, Rokiah, Zaiton, Sarimah and many others were able to preserve intact a persona which was as gorgeous off the screen as on.

When an actor is surrounded, as Ramlee was, by so many beautiful women, the filmgoer, whose existence is decidedly less romantic, cannot help but ask the inevitable question. Did he, the query runs, fall in love with them? Confronted every day with the loveliest females in all Malaya, and later Malaysia, proclaiming, as the script demanded, his adoration of them, and declaring his passionate love for them, did he not arrive at a point where make-believe tipped over into reality? Might not temptation have triumphed over professional instincts? Might not the presence of so much beauty have turned play-acting into the real thing?

As the actor-dramatist Sacha Guitry once explained: "To act is to tell lies with the aim of deceiving. Everything around the actor should tell lies. The good actor should say 'I love you' with greater conviction to an actress he doesn't love than to one

whom he does. And he should convince the audience that he is acting on stage when in reality he is not. The refinement of refinements is to appear to be in love with an actress whom one does not really love—it's like eating a genuine chicken while making believe it's cardboard".

Let us remember, then, that the successful actor is the one who can make his audience believe he is the soul of joy and happiness when in reality he is feeling depressed. He can also convince you that he is in the depths of despair when in fact he has never felt better. Similarly he can persuade you that he is deeply in love while in his mind he is actually working out his laundry list and longing for nothing more passionate than a good cup of tea. If Ramlee on screen was a dashing romantic lover, off the set he was more of a benevolent uncle to his leading ladies than a gallant Don Juan. He took a kindly interest in their welfare, advised them on their careers, and used his influence to smooth out their professional problems. When Neng Yatimah was dismissed by the studio over a trade union dispute, Ramlee went to the employers in person, argued her case, and persuaded them to reinstate her.

In the last film he ever made, *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (1972), his youthful co-star was Dayang Sulu. In front of the camera she was the lovely princess who had to be rescued from her villainous captors. Off the screen she was a hopeful young actress who had braved her father's disapproval by entering the profession determined to win through on the strength of her considerable talent. Ramlee treated her in the same way as he had treated all the women who appeared with him, from Rokiah to Sofia Ibrahim, from Siti Tanjong Perak to Seri Dewi, from Zaiton to Nor Azizah, and from Normadiah and Roseyatimah to Murni Sarawak and Rosmawati. That is to say, while delivering the immaculate performance that was expected of him while the camera was turning, off the set he was their guide,

philosopher and friend. He helped Dayang Sulu to perfect her technique, gave her sympathetic advice, and, most important of all, strengthened her professional resolve with practical encouragement. Kasma Booty, more than anyone, has cause to remember Ramlee with affection. She co-starred with him in a number of films over a period of thirteen years. He was, she says, like an elder brother, guiding her through all the dilemmas and crises which arose during her brilliantly successful career. She knew that, whatever her problem, she could rely on him for a ready hearing and thoughtful counsel. Even today she cannot speak without tears in her eyes when she recalls the memory of her time with him. She is not the only one whose gratitude to him will never be forgotten.

As for Ramlee the lover off screen we need look no further than his encounter with the lady who was to become his second wife. During the mid-1950s his marriage had drifted into a troubled state. Despite his success and the large sums of money he was earning, despite his reputation as one of the most popular figures in the country, Ramlee was not always at ease with himself. A fundamental insecurity haunted him. It showed in the jealousy that gnawed at him where his relations with women were concerned. When he fell in love he became possessive, and, if he suspected other men of taking more than a passing interest in the women he loved, his anger was quick and unforgiving. In the busy life he led, spending hours in the studio or on location, working at the piano on his songs, rehearsing and, latterly, directing films, there was little opportunity for building a tranquil and conventional domestic life. His son Nasir had soon got used to relying on scribbled notes from his father as the pattern of their relationship. Moreover, Ramlee had fallen out of love with Junaidah after some five years of marriage. So in 1955, even though she was five months pregnant with a second child, they were divorced.



Arfan and Junaidah



P. Ramlee and Noorizan Mohd. Nor

The child turned out to be a son who was called Arfan. Junaidah went on to marry the actor and scriptwriter A. Harris by whom she had four more children. She died, aged sixty-six, on 1st April 1998, at her home in Jakarta Pasar. Arfan had passed away earlier in the same year, and mother and son were buried close to each other.

Ramlee was alone again—but not for long. On a concert tour of Perak he happened to have an engagement at a cinema in Kuala Kangsar. There he made the acquaintance of Noorizan binti Mohamad Noor who was also the wife of Paduka Seri Sultan Yusof. Her career has something of Hollywood fantasy about it. She was a lady of striking beauty. Her romantic ascent to a Sultan's wife won her an existence of palatial grandeur and the loving care of an adoring benefactor. After a time, however, she grew weary of royal etiquette and its endless ceremonies and banquets and stifling conventions. At this point she saw Ramlee and his roadshow. She was instantly captivated by his songs and by the man himself, although some reckoned it was his penetrating eyes that conquered her heart. Ramlee, enchanted by her sultry black eyes and her lithe, elegant figure, found himself in love again. Following the custom he observed in all his affairs of the heart, he wrote her passionate letters which, unwilling to trust to ordinary pillar-boxes in the street, he insisted on sending from main post-offices. The latter were, he believed, the only completely reliable way of getting his message to her.

When the Sultan eventually came to know about the situation, his reaction was surprisingly mild. Rather than play the undignified role of deceived husband in a bedroom farce, he forgave his wife and relinquished his claim on her. Was it because, in old age, he had wearied of her youthful brightness and vivacity? One prefers not to think so, because he insisted, as a condition of his agreement to her departure, that Ramlee treat

her always with the utmost consideration and look after her with the greatest of care. Is it not said that the test of true love is the capacity to make a supreme sacrifice on behalf of the loved one? If so, then the Sultan genuinely loved her. Ramlee and Noorizan were duly married on 6th February 1955, at the local *kadi's* office in Singapore. He was twenty-six, two years younger than his wife. As a witty Frenchman once observed, should we wish to be bachelors once again, we should take care to marry only the most beautiful of women, since there are always men around who would be keen to take her on. It was advice that Ramlee unwittingly observed, and the result that followed in the years to come was exactly as one might expect.

From the early 1950s onward Ramlee's versatile talents were being acknowledged not only by cinema audiences throughout Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia, but also by official organisations. In 1953 he won the "Best Singer" award. Three years later, at the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival of 1956, he won an accolade for "The Best Music" in the film *Hang Tuah*. His performance in *Anak-ku Sazali* brought him the Best Male Actor award from the Asian Film Festival of 1957 in Tokyo.

So popular was he, this "star idolised by millions" as his admirers hailed him, this owner of the "golden voice" heard in songs everyone loved, that souvenir booklets were distributed among cinema audiences to help them follow the words as he sang. In 1951 he recorded for His Master's Voice (HMV) the popular "Bayangan Wajahmu" from the film *Pulau Mutiara*, and, for Pathé, several others not necessarily written for the cinema. Among those who also recorded his songs with him were the adaptable Momo Latif, Asiah ("the nightingale of Malaya"), Rubiah, Lena and Normadiah.

Yet his flourishing career was not without problems. As an artiste who sought to present his work in the best possible set-



P. Ramlee (left) with Momo



Rubiah



Lena



Nona Asiah -
"The Nightingale of Malaya"



Normadiyah

ting, he wanted extra players for an orchestra who would do justice to his songs. The business manager of the recording company balked at this and was unwilling to pay the additional fees required. The result was that from 1952 to 1955 Ramlee made no records in person. Instead, many of the best songs from his films were sung by male performers like Aziz Jaafar, R. Azmi and Jasni and by women such as Rubiah and Lena. By the end of that period, however, a new business manager had taken over, a fresh agreement was reached, and Ramlee's voice was again to be heard on record.

The 78 rpm records that Ramlee made at that time are now, of course, rare items. They were produced by the firm of T. Hemsley and Co., Singapore, an associated company of EMI in England, better known as His Master's Voice (HMV), as the famous label on the record indicated with its charming picture of the dog Nipper, his ear cocked to hear the sound issuing from the horn of an old-fashioned gramophone. When Ramlee took up recording again it was chiefly under the auspices of Parlophone and Pathé, although he was regarded as more of a Pathé artiste since the company recorded many of his film songs. At each innovation in the recording business Ramlee gained new admirers, and the "golden voice" progressed from 78s via 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm and cassette tapes and compact discs to be born anew for succeeding generations. The latest addition to this valuable recorded legacy is the orchestral arrangement of his songs played by the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra. Thus the magic of Ramlee extends around the globe from Kuala Lumpur to Moscow and returns in the shape of a brilliant orchestral version.

There were developments, too, in his private life. His father, who had been ailing for some time, died in 1956 at the early age of fifty-three. Despite increasing blindness, Teuku Nyak Puteh bin Teuku Karim had continued to visit his local cinema when a P. Ramlee film was showing. Although he could

not see much what happened on the screen, he could at least enjoy the sound of his talented son's voice and music. No one would ever be able to explain how he, this quiet simple man, and his wife could have produced such an abundantly gifted artiste. They did not try to resolve the enigma, no one could have, and they were happy just to take intense pride in him.

A few months after his second marriage, Ramlee entered on another new phase of his life, this time as a film director. At his disposal lay the many resources of the Malay Film Productions. The Shaw brothers' headquarters remained at No. 8 Jalan Ampas, off Balestier Road in Singapore. There, the two large studios which in 1947 had been re-stocked with Hollywood equipment worth more than a million dollars had been continually improved and modernised over the years. The Shaws made regular trips round the world in search of new ideas and the latest methods developed within the international film industry. While they strove always to keep their studios equipped with the best machinery available, they did not neglect the importance of publicity. They took their example from Hollywood, where almost as much money tended to be spent on marketing a film as on its actual production. Once a film had been scheduled they made plans for it to be dubbed or subtitled in Tagalog for the Philippines and in appropriate languages, including English, for other markets they targeted. Once the exploitation of a film had been decided on, Runme Shaw called in all his regional publicity managers for detailed briefings. Advertisements were placed, tie-ins were arranged with local agencies, and special supplements were organised in both English and vernacular newspapers. The Shaws' own printing works then collaborated with a huge art department to produce posters and other display materials which went out to support the chain of over 150 cinemas throughout Singapore, Malaya, Borneo, Sarawak, Indonesia, Bangkok and the Philip-

pines. Success at the box-office was underwritten by campaigns which sold the film to the public in advance.

With this highly efficient organisation to back him up, Ramlee ventured on his first project as director. As well as taking the lead role in it he also wrote the original story, the dialogue and the music. The score included one of his most famous songs, the enigmatic "Azizah", which has caused so much argument as to the girl who inspired it. If the mystery has yet to be solved, the music itself continues to give pleasure with its tender nonchalance. For the inspiration of his film he went back to his boyhood memories of the vehicle he used to see in the narrow streets of Penang, the humble *jinriksha* ("human-powered conveyance") born in Japan around 1870 and soon appearing thereafter across Asia from Calcutta to Tiananmen Square, from Dhaka to Singapore.

In *Penarek Becha* (1955) ("Trishaw Peddler") as the film was called, Ramlee himself took the leading role of Amran, a humble trishaw operator. Every day, through sheets of icy rain and burning sunshine, through mud or through choking dust, Amran pedals the creaking old machine that is the only means of livelihood he can find to support himself and his aged mother who lies ill at home. One evening he picks up a fare in the person of Azizah, a winsome girl student on her way back from school. Her rich but miserly father Marzuki is persuaded to charter Amran's trishaw to take Azizah regularly to school and back. A deep affection springs up between them. It is disturbed by Gazali, an oafish young man who has designs on Azizah. He insinuates himself into the confidence of her father and poisons his mind against the blameless Amran. Marzuki instantly revokes their arrangement and warns Amran to keep away from his daughter. When he goes even further and, lulled by the false tales he has heard about Amran, announces that he has chosen the scheming Gazali as the future husband of Azizah, the latter

P. RAMLEE

THE DIRECTOR, THE ACTOR, THE STORY-WRITER
AND THE MUSIC COMPOSER

IN
MALAY FILM PRODUCTIONS'
Most Dynamic Drama Of All Times!
THERE'S ACTION! ROMANCE!!! & THRILLS!!

The picture which
has everything
for you and your
family!



PENAREK BECHA



With
**SA'ADIAH
SALLEH KAMIL**

UDO UMAR • SA'AMAH • HABSAH • ZAINON
SHARIF DOL • OMAR SUWITA • MOHD. HAMID

steals away in despair for help from the trishaw peddler. Gazali erupts with anger, follows her to Amran's home, and plunges into a desperate fight with his rival. Amran's ailing mother is wounded in the confusion. Fearing that he has killed her, Gazali rushes away to Marzuki and asks for money to keep him from the law. The old man refuses, whereupon Gazali threatens him with a knife—at which point Amran and Azizah arrive just in time to rescue him. Gazali is taken off in custody and Marzuki at last realises that he has been deceived. He gives his blessing to Amran, promises to help him with his education, and looks forward to the day when the young man will become his son-in-law.

At one level this is a straightforward entertainment film. The hero is poor but handsome and deserving, the heroine is adorable, and the villain is a particularly nasty piece of work who blackens innocence and libels goodness. The conflict between Amran and Gazali, backed at first by Marzuki, is clean-cut and guaranteed to engage the sympathy of the audience, while Amran's sick mother adds an effective note of pathos. Amran's final triumph is something everyone is hoping for. It was, surely, these elements that at first attracted the crowds into the cinemas. "Thousands turned away last midnight!!!" exulted the poster advertisements. "No Free Seats". Making allowance for the exuberance of the copywriters, however, it must be admitted that here was a formula tailored to win success among regular filmgoers.

Yet there is something more to the film. Social criticism is implied in the stark contrast between Amran's poverty-stricken existence and the easeful life of Marzuki's rich family. Whereas Amran exhausts himself every hour of the day, and often into the night, to earn the few miserable coins that will help keep his mother and himself in food, Marzuki's household luxuriates in comfort. What is the solution to this problem of inequality?

Education, says the film. Although Azizah's father, influenced by Gazali, has forbidden her to go on seeing Amran, her handsome and intelligent admirer, she ignores the ban and promises to help him attend a night school. That way, she reasons, he will be able to develop his potential and improve his chances of the career which his talents deserve. When Marzuki realises the true state of affairs, besides giving him his blessing as his future son-in-law he also agrees to assist him with his education. So the film's message is that the first step towards a fairer society with equal opportunity for all is an education that will help each member of it to ripen his or her individual potential.

The actress who played the part of the heroine was Saadiah. Although only nineteen at the time, she was already a veteran of the studios at Jalan Ampas, for she had begun her film career at the age of thirteen with appearances in the two Ramlee films *Rachun Dunia* and *Bakti*. The Singaporean actress whose lustrous beauty had made her an early favourite with cinema audiences also impressed Ramlee. He cast her in *Semerah Padi* (1956), the next film he directed, as well as in several others where her natural appeal shone to advantage. In *Semerah Padi*, which is a period story set in early Malay times, she was Dara, the only daughter of the local *Pengbulu* whom the Sultan has entrusted with ruling the district. He carries out his duty, a difficult one in the revolutionary days, with justice and discretion according to his devout Islamic faith. His loyal assistants in the task are Aduka (Ramlee) and Taruna (Nordin Ahmad). Dara is betrothed with the blessing of her father to Taruna in an arranged marriage just when the peaceful life of the area is disrupted by the bandit Borek. He lays waste with murder and plunder in revenge for the execution of his brother, who in connivance with the guilty wife, has brought about the murder of her husband. Aduka and Taruna volunteer to track him down. In the course of their adventures Borek abducts

Dara. Following a bloody battle she is rescued by Aduka. While they shelter from a raging storm on their return to Semerah Padi they realise that they are in love with each other. Under Islamic law there can only be one penalty to pay. Aduka unsheathes his sword and confesses his sin to Taruna. But the latter's comradeship with him is stronger than his love for Dara, and he refuses to kill him as he would be entitled so to do. The *Pengbulu* intervenes, however, and condemns his daughter and her lover to the traditional punishment of a hundred strokes of the *rotan*.

At first sight *Semerah Padi* is an exciting historical epic with lots of action and colourful scenes. A closer look, however, reveals more thoughtful strands in the plot. The theme of conflict runs throughout. The *Pengbulu* is torn between paternal care for his daughter and the demands of his faith when he is obliged to punish her for forbidden love. Taruna has to choose between affection for Aduka his comrade-in-arms and his love for Dara: he goes counter to tradition and decides on forgiveness. Besides depicting the psychological problems created by the injunctions of religion, *Semerah Padi* also broached the subject of arranged marriage and the stress it provokes. In such a way, while at the same time providing enjoyable entertainment, Ramlee did encourage cinema audiences to reflect more deeply on the society in which they lived.

The same could not be said of his next film. Ramlee never forgot that his primary aim was to entertain filmgoers, and *Pancha Delima* (1957) was a lively example of pure escapism. The storyline draws generously on *Cinderella*, *The Thief of Baghdad* and even, fleetingly, on *Hamlet*. It features a young prince who, bewitched by his evil stepmother, turns into a snake during the daytime. The only way he can escape from the curse laid upon him is by finding the "Pancha Delima", a sacred necklace. This, one is not surprised to learn, graces the pretty



P. Ramlee and Saadijah in *Semerah Padi* (1956)

throat of a woodcutter's daughter. The charming young beauty has the misfortune, like Cinderella, to share her existence with two ugly sisters who do their best to make life a misery for her. Of course, when handsome Prince Suria comes in search of the necklace her jealous siblings imagine that they are the object of his desires. The traditional happy ending is negotiated after a chain of balletic fencing bouts, trick photography to conjure up the snake, some broad slapstick to amuse the groundlings and even a brief appearance by the genie from the *Arabian Nights*. The mixture is bound together with attractive songs of a traditional flavour performed offscreen by Ramlee and a partner with whom he was becoming more and more identified professionally. Her name was Saloma.

"It's just fantasy," explained Ramlee at the press showing of *Pancha Delima*. "Something different, you know!" There was something different, too, about the new face of the actor who played the handsome prince. The cast list was prefaced by the phrase "and introducing Jins Shamsudin", then a twenty-one-year-old student who happened to be on holiday in Singapore from his hometown of Taiping. Quite by chance he took part in some amateur dramatics there and was "spotted" by Ramlee. A screen test quickly revealed his natural ability and led to his appearance in *Pancha Delima*. A critic wrote of this latest "find": "He is a very personable young man with an easy style who under good directors should quickly make a name for himself." For once there was no argument with a critical judgement, for Jins Shamsudin soon became a celebrated and much admired figure who was to star in and direct well over fifty films, garner many awards and distinctions, and build a reputation as a creative leader in the Malay film business.

Although he had now become a director in addition to his functions as actor, composer, scriptwriter and singer, Ramlee continued his role as publisher of the magazine *Bintang* which

he had launched several years previously. Published from offices in Robinson Road, Singapore, it was written in Jawi and available at the modest price of forty cents. The contents included words and music of Ramlee songs, a selected "Film of the Month", the latest news of Malay film activities, and reports on films from Indonesia, India and Hollywood. With his "Letter from the Editor" Ramlee headed a team of contributors he described as "my friends and fellow workers". They included his versatile colleague Jamil Sulong the lyric writer, actor and director. Another was Abdullah Hussain (now Dato'), the distinguished man of letters and author of the acclaimed *P. Ramlee: Kisah Hidup Seniman Agong* (1984). Old issues of *Bintang* are today much sought-after items for their valuable pictures and texts. The editor, for a time, was Fatimah Murad, wife of Asraf Haji Wahab. Critic, linguist, brilliant talker, all-round literary man, the late Asraf brought intellectual distinction to the journal which soon became more than a simple fan magazine. He was closely associated with the *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (ASAS 50), the movement which at that time sought to encourage a new type of writing and a fresh sense of identity which would lead to a spirit of independence among the Malays. Indeed, the *Bintang* office shared a building with ASAS 50.

Ramlee, alas, was no businessman, as we have already seen. Despite injections of capital to prop up its financial structure, *Bintang* only achieved a circulation that wavered between five and six thousand copies per issue, despite its popularity with fans. It closed down in 1955. Some time afterwards Ramlee and his friends tried again with *Gelombang Filem* which appeared twice, then three times, a month. Priced at thirty cents and printed in Jawi, it aimed at encouraging excellence and stimulating discussion with such regular features as Best Film, Best Director, Best Plot, Best Songs, Best Actor, Best Actress

and so forth. *Gelanggang Filem* lasted not much longer than *Bintang*. It did, however, give an early opportunity to a young man who had come to Singapore in 1950 in search of a job. He worked for Abdullah Hussain on the magazines and, having been persuaded by Ramlee to change his name to Aimi Jarr, started on the career that was to make him a well-known journalist and editor. His book *P. Ramlee Dari Kaca Mata Aimi Jarr* (1984) provides an interesting anecdotal account of Ramlee's life.

It is an amusing coincidence that Ramlee, who was the least highbrow of men, should have been so closely associated with writers and intellectuals. Roomai Noor, who starred in some of the early films Ramlee made as a supporting player, came from Temerloh where political radicalism flourished. Having been elected "Mr. Movie Idol 1956", Roomai Noor used his popularity in the cinema to spread the gospel of home-grown Malay culture throughout the film business and figured largely in the activities of the Malay Nationalist Party. Ramlee was also to know Abdul Samad Said (now Datuk) who contributed to *Gelanggang Filem* in the days when he worked as a regular journalist. Samad Said is now, of course, a leading member of the Malay literary scene, a prolific poet, novelist, playwright and reviewer. In 1986, recalling his memories of Ramlee, he was to write an eulogy full of bittersweet musing about the long-gone idol of the cinema. He called his poem "Lagu Bunga II". In Harry Aveling's sensitive translation from the original Malay, it opens poignantly:

*A cold rain falls across Jalan Ampas,
flowers drop wearily among the long grass,
the sky is scarred with pain. Wearing
sandals, a long shirt and sarong,
his hair combed back from his forehead,*

*he pushed his chess pieces between the broken
squares of his films ...*

*... He gave meaning to our hills and valleys,
he believed in our culture,
helped it flow, and
waving it like a flag before him
stormed unknown heights ...*

*... Running between Azizah and Baidah,
"The Grizzled Bachelor" and "The Man with Many Wives",
matured "Caught Between Two Worlds",
his memory sometimes startles us,
late at night ... when we remember what he looked like,
his spirit, the rhythm of his songs,
the innocence of his laughter—
these remain
in A. Sattar's dreamy tangos
in Mustarjo's silat movements
in Saloma's gentle sway
in Latifah's haunting smile
... His worth and dignity are gathered like jewels
his jokes were like treasures, cargo
carried on the boat of his soul—
sometimes when we laugh
we can hear his heart beat,
sometimes when we cry,
we can feel his songs around us ...*

The poem continues:

*... He
never gave up.*

*He was a brave sad crow,
a guitar threaded with history,
an unfinished legend, a man of art
who lived in the lonely jungle.
He died a simple death
in the blaze of twilight.*

It ends:

*Now that he has gone on before us
we can begin to appreciate
what he left us,
he has gone
and we are everywhere aware of him,
we are everywhere aware of him
because he has gone
his death
is our misfortune.
We owe him so much.*

Poetry, however, did not figure much on Ramlee's list of preferred reading. Neither did works of fiction. The only novel he is known to have read was *Atheis* by the Indonesian writer, Achdiat K. Mihadja, which enshrines a plot of left-wing tendency. He had no real interest in politics, though, and was happiest browsing through comics that featured the adventures of Tarzan and the more homely exploits of Mickey Mouse. With their assistance he could lose himself in the jungle, in tales of buried treasure and daring flights through the trees and battles with the crocodiles, or in cosy anecdotes about Mickey and Minnie and Donald Duck. The stories made their appeal with bright colours, fluent drawing, and crisp dialogue artfully placed in balloons that encouraged easy reading. They were

models of how to get a point over in the quickest and most effective way. There was a lesson here for an alert film-maker, and Ramlee duly profited by it.

So, when he was not working in the studio, rather than shut himself up with a book he preferred to surround himself with friends. Inevitably, as with all successful stars, there were hangers-on among them, free-loaders attracted by his generosity and open-handedness. But there was also a nucleus of faithful friends who stood by him in bad times as well as good ones. Over the years he built up what amounted to a repertory company of actors whose talent he admired and whom he liked to number among his casts. Now that he was a director and could write his own scripts he took pleasure in tailoring roles for them and enjoyed working with them. One of the most prominent of these friends was Aziz Sattar.

"I was sharing a place with the singer R. Azmi," Aziz Sattar recalled on thinking back to his days of filming in Singapore. "When we went to parties we would meet P. Ramlee. Then when I moved into the bachelors' quarters in Jalan Ampas I really got to know Ramlee. It was then that a Chinese called Cheng Kok taught both of us a lot about film-making. We learned our editing techniques from him." Things were different in those days. Actors rehearsed their roles in their own time. Usually, on the night before shooting, Aziz Sattar would go over to Ramlee's quarters to discuss problems with him. Sometimes they would talk till morning and miss out on sleep. This form of collaboration, so rare today, was made possible by the Shaw organisation's custom of housing its staff in "resettlement colonies" where directors, actors and technicians kept up close daily touch.

In *Bujang Lapok* (1957), Ramlee's next film as director, he cast Aziz Sattar and the comedian S. Shamsuddin along with himself as the three "bachelors" of the title. The Singapore-

born Shamsuddin had already distinguished himself in Shaw films, and, with Ramlee and Aziz, was to make up a comic trio that became very popular. "Even when we worked hard, sometimes up to twenty-four hours without sleep," Aziz Sattar remembered, "we never got bored. Ramlee liked all our ideas—Shamsuddin's and mine. He never refused an idea, whether movements or words."

Aziz and Shamsuddin were a mischievous pair. These two birds of a feather would play pranks like changing the script around and improvising at rehearsals without Ramlee suspecting what was going on. Then, when actual shooting had begun, they would introduce all sorts of unexpected ad libs. Ramlee would erupt with laughter and give up with the remark, "Allah lu orang, you directlah!" He never became angry, though sometimes he pretended to be. There were periods when they could not stop laughing from nine in the morning until two. Nothing could be done in such a hilarious atmosphere, so Ramlee would end the proceedings and pack everyone off home.

The next day he'd get them to try once more, this time including the improvisations which the two partners in crime had thought up. It only made them start laughing all over again. Ramlee couldn't help but join in. "It happened all the time. He just couldn't *tahan* (stand) it. Later he would *belanja* (spend) us *kopi* (coffee) at a nearby coffee shop." "And you know, whenever we did stage shows, I would direct," Aziz remembers, "because Ramlee had less experience of the stage. But, of course, when it came to films, he would direct. Ramlee was such a good friend, a good director too. He never allowed us to get bored. We never had a tiff throughout our friendship. I would have done those films for free, you know."

In fact, Aziz and his friends were working anyway for modest salaries. They were paid two hundred dollars a month plus a bonus of five hundred dollars on the completion of each film.

Ramlee himself, as director and star, received thirty thousand dollars per film, though if he failed to complete it by the deadline he was "fined" an amount to be deducted on a scale that increased depending on the time overdue. Still, money was not his prime consideration. He was more concerned with getting the artistic product right—not to mention enjoying the antics of Aziz and company.

Life in the "compounds" which housed the Shaw employees was very agreeable. A spirit of comradeship bound them together and inspired a feeling of togetherness which was reflected in their work. If there was not much money around, there was a great deal of fun. "We lived on French bread and water," Aziz remembered. "That bread was very popular in Singapore at the time—only five cents." Everyone knew everyone else. "We would go over to each other's quarters every night. When Sudin got married he and his family also moved to Jalan Ampas. There were times when we played tricks on Ramlee. He has a girlfriend called Hamidah who used to drive over for visits. She would bring fruit and cakes to the kitchen. Sudin and I would leave Ramlee and Hamidah talking at the front of the house while we *kebas* (finished) all the food!"

Film-makers then, under the Shaw banner, were a community, in touch with each other twenty-four hours a day and constantly exchanging ideas. "In our day," Aziz comments, "we rehearsed our parts in our own time. Today there is a lack of communication. Actors hardly talk when they are off the set. They arrive with their script, do their part and leave when it's over. If they had a bit more concentration it would help."

Returning to those happy days once again, Aziz remarks: "We used to rehearse while other scenes were being shot. We'd rehearse until the director was satisfied. Occasionally there would be busloads of visitors to Jalan Ampas and the place would turn into something like a museum. We were objects of

interest, and they would ask us for our autographs. I shall never again experience those happy days we had while shooting the *Bujang Lapok* series. It was enjoy, enjoy, ENJOY!"

The three bachelors in *Bujang Lapok*, played by Ramlee, Aziz and Shamsuddin, are not so much "mouldy" or "mildewed" as past the first flush of youth and somewhat shop-soiled. They have dull jobs, Ramlee a salesman, Aziz a lorry driver, and Shamsuddin a junior clerk. The tone is set in the opening sequence, where the happy-go-lucky Ramlee, who would prefer to spend his time lazing around in cafés, attempts to sell his wares to an unenthusiastic company manager. As he tries desperately to conjure up interest in the paltry goods he fishes out his shabby case, the manager pays not the slightest heed to his faltering sales talk and instead gives all his attention to the radio commentary on a race meeting. His horse does not win, he loses his bet, and he shows Ramlee the door. The action, not all that amusing when recounted, is enlivened with many comic tricks, enriched by Ramlee's gift for laughing at himself, the point being that he is only too well aware of his utter failure to be a convincing salesman.

He goes home to the boarding house where he shares rooms with Aziz and Shamuddin, an establishment ruled over by a formidable landlady. The hopeless trio set about cooking chicken for their supper but ruin it when a plate of salt falls into the saucepan. Thus, it seems, everything they try to do ends up in disaster. The plot develops with much clowning and horseplay as the three mates each seek the favours of their girlfriends. Romance enters into it when Ramlee has a date with Normadiah by the side of a lake. He sings a duet with her about the way of the world and how no one can avoid unhappiness or torment. Life brings an inevitable blend of delight and grief, and we have to put up with it, he wryly sings to a languorous melody. The music he wrote for the film is particularly effective, in-

cluding a delectable lyric he performs by moonlight to his own guitar accompaniment. The score also includes typically ingenious touches, as when, for example, Normadiah rushes anxiously along under the trees while an arpeggio cascades down the piano keyboard.

Much of the film is taken up with the kind-hearted Ramlee's efforts to help his two friends marry the girls of their choice. These involve him in delicate negotiations with Sudin's prospective mother-in-law whom he dazzles with a non-existent dowry, beside appeasing an outraged stepfather who suspects the worst of Aziz when the latter rescues his ward from an attempted suicide. Eventually, on the day when Sudin and Aziz are about to be married, Ramlee, still without a fiancée, loses his suit in a café brawl. He arrives for the ceremony and is mistaken by wedding guests for a thief.

Fortunately, Normadiah recognises him and, what is more, decides that it is time they were married too. So they join the others and make it a triple wedding ceremony.

Bujang Lapok fizzed with high spirits. The comedy was broad, the slapstick laid on with a trowel, and the pace uproarious. The three actors worked with perfect ensemble and split-second timing that could only come from thorough rehearsal, although the effect was delightfully spontaneous, as if someone had set up a camera in front of them and left them to get on with the job. The fun of the film was counterpointed by the charms of the girls. Normadiah and Zaiton proved to be perfect foils to the bachelors with whom they were involved, while Dayang Sofia, a newcomer to the cinema, introduced a fresh and beguiling face as the bride of Aziz.

Audiences loved *Bujang Lapok*. Ramlee and his team had devised a formula which was too good to be confined within the limits of a single film. It was made in 1957, and, as soon as

Ramlee had cleared off his other film commitments, he returned to the idea. *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959) was the result, and the cast was further strengthened by the recruitment of Ibrahim Pendek, whom we have met already in the pirate romance *Panggilan Pulau*, and Mustarjo, who had also appeared in earlier films with Ramlee. Little Ibrahim, with his roguish eye and bouncy mien, was born for comedy. A *pantun* about him runs as follows:

*Banyak-banyak si buah betik
Manakan sama yang baru dipetik
Banyak-banyak si orang katek
Takkan sama Che Ibrahim Pendek*

Mustarjo was a splendid veteran of the *bangsawan*, the *sandiwara*, the *wayang kulit* and the Indian opera. He came from Java, and since 1951 had graced many MFP productions with his benign and authoritative presence. In *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*, Mustarjo was the swashbuckling *pendekar* (self-defence champion). Our three bachelor friends are waiting one day on the village jetty for a *sampan* to take them over the river. While there they see the *pendekar* in action. He is under attack from a gang of bullies who work for the wealthy owner of the *sampan* ferries. Neatly, swiftly the wiry old man thrashes each of them and leaves them groaning in the dirt. The three bachelors, much impressed by the *pendekar's* effortless skill, beg him to teach them the art of self-defence. He jovially agrees, although he is startled to find they have a serious handicap: none of them can read or write. So he bundles them off to a beginners' class in a school for the aged where their teacher is the pretty Rosnah, his daughter. (She was played by the Singapore-born actress Roseyatimah who died tragically young in 1987.) Having learned to read and write, the trio are dispersed into secluded

places where they recite the sacred mantras of self-defence. At the same time, by the rules of initiation, they must face up to any horrors or eerie happenings as a test of their will power. Aziz carries out the exercise in an abandoned well, Sudin undergoes his test in a ruined cabin, and Ramlee is consigned to a graveyard. Needless to say, their nerve lets them down and they flee. The *pendekar*, disgusted by their cowardice, orders them all back to the graveyard. They have strict instructions not to let themselves be distracted by anything, however, terrifying. While they are chanting the sacred verses among the tombstones they see the gang of bullies carrying away Rosnah who screams out for help. They imagine that this is another test of their endurance and ignore her plight. The *pendekar*, who has been tied up with his wife and servant, breaks free and tells the three bachelors that the kidnap is the real thing. But the dimwits persist in believing the incident is another test and answer his despairing pleas with sacred chants. Finally he convinces them that he is not joking. They eventually set off, rescue the girl, and cover themselves with glory as fully-fledged graduates in self-defence.

The award of the Best Comedy trophy at the Asian Film Festival of 1959 in Kuala Lumpur confirmed that with *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* Ramlee had evolved a winning formula. What, then, could have been more appropriate than to feature the trio as would-be film stars in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961). Still jobless and penniless, still leading a spartan existence in a crowded boarding house, they discover there is a film studio nearby and dream of stardom. Much of the film breaks down into a series of gags, as when the studio manager arranges screen tests which give them an opportunity to clown about. The manager is impressed and takes them on for a new production. The next obstacle is learning the parts for which they have been cast. This is well-nigh impossible in the noisy board-



Left to right: M. Zain, S. Shamsuddin and P. Ramlee in
Nasib Si-Labu Labi (1963)



Left to right: Aziz Sattar, P. Ramlee and S. Shamsuddin in
Bujang Lapok (1957)



P. Ramlee in *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961)



P. Ramlee in *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961)



P. Ramlee, whose hairstyle, M-shaped moustache and shirt fashion were the craze during the golden era of the Malay film industry

ing house, and there follows a sequence in which the would-be film stars battle to concentrate against the shrieks of playful children, the din of quarrelling couples, the blare of trumpet practice, the chatter of radio programmes and the revving of motorbikes.

Interwoven with the tale of how the three bachelors achieve stardom is the romance of Ramlee and the heroine Salmah. The latter was played by the twenty-five-year-old singer/actress known professionally as Saloma. As we shall see in the next chapter, she was to play an even larger role in his private life. Their courtship on screen was paralleled by a romance off the studio set. In the film, however, Ramlee's wooing is assisted by the well-intentioned though bungling Sudin, who buys a "magic" stone to help finance the marriage, though it turns out to be a fake. Needless to say, after many trials, including a house on fire and a bloody fight with a rival for Salmah's hand, Ramlee gets his girl. And so do the other two bachelors.

They were reunited in *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961) which burlesqued the classic tale of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. In this version Ali Baba (Aziz Sattar) has a brother called Kassim Baba (Sudin). Ali is a poor man while his brother is a rich but selfish merchant always very reluctant to help him out at any time. While earning his modest living as a woodcutter in the jungle, Ali spies a band of forty robbers slinking into a cave nearby. Led by the robber chief (Ramlee), who pronounces the magic words that open the cave, they deposit many wooden chests therein and march away. Ali, hidden in a tree, overhears the secret code, and, when the coast is clear, stands in front of the cave and repeats it. Here follows a linguistic in-joke. Instead of the classic phrase "Open Sesame", he utters a sentence in Javanese which means, roughly (very roughly), "Please open up, I really have to go (to the lavatory)."

The cave opens up and reveals stack upon stack of boxes stuffed to overflowing with gold coins. Ali becomes a wealthy man overnight. His jealous brother pesters him so intensely about the source of his riches that the good-hearted Ali tells him the secret. Whereupon Kassim rushes to the cave and starts emptying it of its treasure. But the robbers return unexpectedly and cut him up into little pieces. Ali finds the body, is helped by a cobbler to stitch it up, and gives it a decent burial. After all, Kassim was his brother, wasn't he? The robber chief is furious when he learns that the corpse has disappeared and sends his trusty lieutenant to the city in search of the culprit. Ali's house is identified and marked with a cross. Marjiana (Sarimah), his slave girl, senses danger and confuses the issue by putting the same mark on a neighbouring house. The robber chief, determined to get his man, discovers the right house and, disguised as a rich merchant, accepts Ali's hospitality. He also asks permission, at the same time, to store forty drums containing oil in the garden. The drums each contain a member of his gang. Once again the shrewd Marjiana scents danger. This time the redoubtable girl dispatches each of the thieves in person, and, for her trouble, is rewarded by Ali with her liberty. Ali himself deals with the robber chief and sends him to kingdom come. Such was the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves as seen through the comically distorting glass of the three shop-soiled bachelors in their most exotic adventure—although Aziz Sattar and Shamsuddin were frequently to make welcome reappearances in Ramlee's films as the years went on.

The music Ramlee composed for the three sequels to *Bujang Lapok* showed his usual flair for matching atmosphere and mood. *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* featured "Malam Bulan di Pagar Bintang", a wistful, pretty melody which he and Saloma performed ensemble with a delicate charm. It contrasted with "Pok-Pok Bujang Lapok", a boisterous number in which he

uses the simplest of motifs to make much out of little. Equally vivacious was "Mencece Bujang Lapok" in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, sung as a trio by Ramlee, Aziz Sattar and Shamsuddin.

Opening with a briskly stepped descending figure, it injects an endearing tempo riang into verse by S. Sudarmadji like the following:

*Bujang lapok pakai songkok
Basikal cabuk tak pernah gosok
Tayar kempis roda bengkok
Badan pepekek macam keropok*

Perhaps the most exquisite of the songs he wrote for the *Bujang Lapok* series is the one entitled "Beginilah Nasib" in *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok*. It unwinds at a gentle, ambling pace and achieves a ravishing effect by switching an E flat into an E natural at a crucial point in the melody. The trick is simple, but it has the simplicity of genius.

The *Bujang Lapok* films demonstrated Ramlee's great gift for comedy. It is Ibrahim Pendek's view that Ramlee was at his best in comedy. Yet if you ask the opinion of actors who worked with Ramlee in drama, they will say he was at his best in drama. Put the same question to those who appeared with him in tragedy, and they will tell you that he was at his best in tragedy. And so it goes with every type of film in which he directed and starred. In other words, this versatile and hugely gifted actor had the capacity to give of his best in whatever sort of role he was chosen to play.

Chapter 6

IN LOVE AGAIN

RITA Hayworth, born Margarita Cansino, was a Hollywood star of the 1940s much admired by men of all ages. Among the latter were Ali Khan, son of the preposterously rich Aga Khan, and Orson Welles, who were both, for a short interval at various times, married to her. Her hair was the colour of glowing embers, and she had very white skin which she displayed with languorous eroticism in her famous number "Put the Blame on Mame" as she coolly peeled off her elbow-length black satin gloves. Less well-known among her attributes are the fact that she was a cousin of Ginger Rogers and that she inspired Salmah in her choice of a professional name.

Salmah binti Ismail (1936-1983) was born in Singapore. While still a schoolgirl she began her career in Radio Malaya by a fortunate chance. One day the singer Rokiah Hanafie who had been engaged to perform was prevented from turning up, whereupon Salmah's stepfather arranged for her to fill the vacancy on the spot. Her warm tones soon became familiar on the radio and she joined the *keroncong* group known as Fajar Murni. The Nusantara Film Company gave her a screen test,



P. Ramlee and Saloma on their wedding day in October 1961

and, impressed by her dark eyes and high cheekbones, starred her in three films. She was then sixteen years old. On her birthday in 1952 she also married the actor A.R. Tompel who was 19 years her senior. By him, a year later, she had a son whom they called Armali. Having packed away domesticity and motherhood into the smallest possible compass, she took up her professional career again and blossomed into a nightclub singer famous for her sultry rendering of "I'm in the Mood for Love" and "Once in a While". Her performance of "Hujan Lebat" was considered no less sensational. It was not long before the Malay Film Productions, ever greedy for new talent that was beautiful as well, signed her up with a contract. There was, however, a slight problem with her name. It did not seem quite right for the purpose of publicity. A new Rita Hayworth film had just appeared, a piece of Christian biblical hokum which told the story of the Galilean princess whose dancing failed to save the life of St. John the Baptist. It was called *Salome*. So the by now seventeen-year-old Salmah binti Ismail was transferred by a wave of the Shaw publicists' wand into Saloma.

We have already met Saloma in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, where she had a starring role as the heroine Salmah. Before making an appearance in that film, her first under Ramlee's direction, she had worked with him as a vocalist, dubbing the voice of actresses in many films, including *Semerah Padi*, *Pancha Delima* and *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*. He had soon learned to value her professionalism and to admire her voice, which, sinuous and perfectly pitched, conveyed a wealth of emotion while at the same time defining the melodic line with absolute clarity. She was that rare type of singer who could always be relied upon to project the composer's inspiration without attempting to impose her own ideas on the music. And yet, by a paradox of which only she knew the secret, her interpretation remained distinctive and very much her own, even though

she faithfully observed the composer's intention at all times. This sort of musicianship is by no means common, and Ramlee, who in the past had suffered from hearing his music distorted by inferior singers, was delighted to come across such an ideal interpreter. Both as a solo performer of his songs and in duets with him, she struck up an immediate rapport. Their professional relationship flourished from the very start, and soon their personal feelings became involved. Ramlee's wife Noorizan had a low boredom threshold. Her husband was such a busy man, for ever composing, writing, directing films, touring roadshows, acting, that she was often lonely. An incident related to Ramlee touched the raw nerves of this sensitive and jealous character. In 1961, the year of the divorce from Noorizan, Ramlee, who was then thirty-two years old, married Saloma, who was seven years his junior. The marriage would probably have taken place anyway, sooner or later, for by now their feelings for each other went far beyond professional relations. So it was that one of the most famous partnerships in modern times came into being. If Ramlee had at last found his life's companion, his son Nasir had discovered a loving stepmother who treated him with as much thoughtfulness and affection as if he had been her own child. She was, indeed, experienced in motherhood, for she already had a nine-year-old son from her first marriage. Having been an only child, quiet and solitary, Nasir now had a playmate of his own age, and he grew up in a household that was warm and loving. Nasir was also briefly brought up by his grandmother in Penang.

Tracing the development of the *Bujang Lapok* series has involved leap-frogging a number of films that were made at the same time. The first of these, chronologically, is an extraordinary production called *Sumpah Orang Minyak*. It was made in 1958 at a period when Malay film studios were competing with each other to see who could produce the most spine-chilling



P. Ramlee in *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (1958)

melodramas drawn from old Malay legends. Cathay films were doing well at the box-office with their series about "Pontianak", the vampire ghost of a woman who died while giving birth, and the Shaw brothers were anxious to meet the challenge with something equally blood-curdling. They found it in the old fairy tale about the "curse of the oily man".

In this film Ramlee showed his versatility by playing a role utterly unlike anything he had done before or was likely to do in future. He was the repulsive hunchback Si-Bongkok, the laughing-stock of the native village and the butt of mockery and cruel jokes. He has a certain talent as an artist and designer, however, and wins the friendship of the gentle Afidah (Seri Dewi), the village *penghulu's* daughter whose portrait he paints. He is about to present Afidah with the portrait when the villagers round on him and denounce him as the son of the man who once made dreadful mischief in the village and nearly murdered the *penghulu's* own brother. Afidah bravely intervenes on his behalf and protests at the injustice of visiting the sins of the father upon the innocent son. As the villagers call angrily for his death, the *penghulu* orders him to be banished. Despised and rejected, the unhappy cripple visits his father's grave and curses him for being the reason for his exile. The atmosphere of the graveyard begins mysteriously to change and a ghostly pal-anquin materialises before his astonished eyes. Out of curiosity he climbs into it and is whisked away through the skies to a beautiful kingdom. This is a fairy realm where the king gives him an audience. Si-Bongkok asks if he can be transformed into a handsome young man, can live in the fairy kingdom, and can marry the fairy princess. The king ordains that he will grant him one request, and one only: that he may turn into a handsome man. He must also refrain from violence.

Si-Bongkok goes back to his native village, and, unrecognised, is welcomed by the inhabitants. Afidah falls in love with

him. One of his old enemies plans to murder him, but the plot misfires and Afidah is killed instead. Forgetting the oath of non-violence he made to the fairy king, Si-Bongkok challenges the murderer to a duel and kills him. At that moment he finds his body dissolving into transparency. While attempting to re-discover the fairy kingdom he is met on the way by an evil power who promises to help him. The condition imposed is that he must ravish twenty-one girls within a week. The evil one gives him a magic ring which turns him into the incredible oily man endowed with superhuman qualities. The rest of the film depicts, with many a gory detail, his reign of terror which only ends when the fairy king captures him and saves the villagers from the dreadful apparition which has been stalking their fearful womenfolk.

Sumpah Orang Minyak offered the cinemagoer three for the price of one, in effect, for Ramlee played the triple roles of hunchback, handsome young hero and the "oily man" in person. He did so with unquenchable relish. No hunchback ever looked so repulsive as he did, no young romantic lead was ever so dashing, and no "oily man" was ever so terrifying. Not content with this abundance of acting opportunities, he also arranged the music by Yusram, joined Salmah Ismail and the MFP chorus as playback singer, and into the bargain, wrote the screenplay and directed the filming himself. The camera work by Abu Bakar Ali was so accomplished that the film won the Best Photography Award at the Asian Film Festival of 1958. It assuredly did full justice to the charm of Seri Dewi as Afidah and of Marion Willis as the fairy princess. The latter, a Singapore fashion model from the Joan Booty Mannequin School, was making her screen debut as a strikingly beautiful contrast with the grotesquely that enshrouded the film.

It was quickly followed by *Sergeant Hassan* (1958), an all-action spectacle that took place during the Japanese invasion of

Malaya. Ramlee was Hassan, an orphan boy adopted by the kindly Malacca landowner Pa Lebai (Daeng Idris, who was a regular member of Ramlee's casts). The old gentleman also had a son, Aziz (Jins Shamsudin), a vain, boastful and spoilt young man who resented Hassan's presence and did all he could to make his life unhappy in the hope that his father would turn the orphan out of the house. One day a British officer from the Malay Regiment arrives to enlist new recruits. Aziz, enticed by the glamour of the uniform, instantly joins up, but Pa Lebai refuses Hassan's plea to let him do the same and tells him he must stay at home to look after the business. Aziz spreads rumours that Hassan is a coward and sets all the villagers against him—all, that is, except Salmah (Saadiyah), the village schoolmaster's pretty daughter who feels sympathy for the quiet well-mannered young man.

Hassan steals secretly from home and makes his way to the Malay Regiment Depot at Port Dickson. Despite the jeers of Aziz and his cronies he makes good progress, proves to be highly efficient and a good shot, and is promoted to lance-corporal. By the time the Japanese have invaded Malaya he is a full sergeant while Aziz remains a humble private. Hassan even saves Aziz's life from a Japanese sniper but gets no thanks for it. Eventually they are captured by the Japanese. Hassan escapes under cover of darkness and runs through the jungle until he collapses from exhaustion. He is discovered by a British Intelligence Officer commanding a band of guerrillas. Hassan joins them in many daring raids on the Japanese. He also rescues Salmah's father who was being taken away for beheading.

At the end of the war Hassan returns in triumph to his village and is acclaimed as a guerrilla hero. Aziz comes back from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, chastened and reformed by his experiences. He asks pardon of Hassan and confesses that the purpose of his malicious campaign had been to discredit



Sergeant Hassan (1958)



him so that he could get his hands on the stepfather's property without having to share it when the old man died. Moreover, he goes on, he is also an adopted son, like Hassan himself. All that remains to complete the happy ending is the joyful reunion of Hassan and Salmah and the preparations for their marriage.

Once again, Ramlee delighted his fans as a heroic man of action, badly wronged at the start but winning his way through to eventual triumph. He also wrote the screenplay and the incidental music. Jins Shamsudin in the role of Aziz partnered him ably, handsome, commanding of presence, and already emerging as a versatile star in his own right. Another familiar face in what had become the unofficial Ramlee repertory company of players was Saadiah as the heroine Salmah. In all she appeared in a dozen of Ramlee's films. She had started, in fact, very early. At the age of thirteen she figured in *Rachun Dunia* alongside Kasma Booty, her favourite star, having been spotted by the director L. Krishnan, ever alert to new talent. So well did she fulfil her youthful promise that she immediately went on to act in *Bakti* and a series of other successful films. Saadiah binti Baharum, a Singaporean, was the daughter of a telephone operator who worked at Kallang airport. She was, said Krishnan, a very capable little person and responded readily to direction. Unlike many child stars, she developed into an accomplished actress, and in *Sergeant Hassan* portrayed a heroine of unaffected charm. It is fitting that when a little girl she named as her favourite pastime the cinema and Malay films in particular. She was to contribute much to the medium that had enthralled her as a child.

Saadiah distinguished herself again in the film *Musang Berjanggut* (1959). This tale of "the bearded fox" signalled a return to a sphere of legend and romance utterly different from the contemporary heroics of *Sergeant Hassan*. The screenplay concocted by Ramlee transported the audience to a mythical

country far away. It is ruled by the Sultan Alam Shah Bana with the aid of his four ministers Datok Bendahara, Datok Bentara Mangku Bumi, Pujangga and Datok Nikah Kahwin. The Sultan, alas, is childless, and so is forced to adopt a son, Tun Nila Utama (Ramlee) whom he makes his Raja Muda, or crown prince. The youth is trained up in all the arts of princedom and royal convention. All goes well until the Sultan decides that it is time his crown prince chooses a wife. And here a problem looms.

Tun Nila Utama journeys all round the country to seek a suitable girl, but, to the Sultan's annoyance, declares that while he can find many who obviously belong to the female sex, there are none whom he judges to be truly womanly women. The Sultan, exasperated, orders him to go on his travels in search of the woman who measures up to his exacting standards. Tun Nila Utama bids farewell to his biological parents and receives from them a quantity of rice, dried fish, chilli, spices, coffee and sugar which he mixes up in a bag and takes with him. Far and wide beyond his native land he ranges on his difficult mission. He meets many women, but none of them grants his request to cook the rice and prepare the curry jumbled up in his bag. Most of them, indeed, think he is dotty.

At last he arrives on a remote island where he meets the alluring Puspawangi (Saadiyah with all her charm fully switched on). She takes him home, neatly separates the contents of his bag and successfully prepares the food for him. He realises that he has met the woman of his dreams. She agrees to marry him, while he, almost as an afterthought, defeats a rival lover in a duel and takes her back to his native country. Once the Sultan and his four ministers see this lovely creature they are eager to know her better and to discover the secret that makes her a fully fledged woman rather than just another member of the female sex. The Sultan at this point falls ill. His strange illness, declares

one of his ministers, can only be cured by eating the liver of an animal called the *musang berjanggut* (bearded fox), and Tun Nila Utama is ordered to hunt and capture it.

The shrewd Puspawangi, however, suspects a trick, and tells her husband to hide nearby. Once Tun Nila Utama is supposed to have left on his errand, the Sultan and each of his four ministers call in turn and woo his lovely wife. A cunning trick hatched by Tun Nila Utama and Puspawangi enables him to trap one of the ministers who happens to have a long beard and to cage him in a box. They send the box to the Sultan with the message that it contains the bearded fox. The Sultan opens the box, perplexed, and out tumbles the venerable minister Datok Nikah Kahwin, his beard quivering with dismay and embarrassment.

The Sultan and his other three ministers reel under the shock. But how can they blame the worthy Datok when they themselves are guilty of the same offence? All's well that ends well, and the young people are left in peace to enjoy their happiness together.

Among familiar faces in the cast was Mustarjo, whose rugged visage, framed in a woolly beard, popped aghast out of the box when the astonished Sultan opened it to find his minister Datok Nikah Kahwin inside.

Saadiah, who was still only twenty-two years old, displayed a grace and maturity beyond her years. Ramlee, jack-of-all-trades, directed as well as providing the music. It included a perky "Joget Pura Chendana" which celebrated the legendary country where the bearded fox was discovered. The choreography of this attractive number was devised by none other than Normadiah.

Some of the fantasy engendered by *Musang Berjanggut* overflowed into Ramlee's next film, *Nujum Pa' Belalang* (1959),



P. Ramlee (second from left) with Ahmad Nesfu (right) in *Nujum Pak Belalang* (1959)

which has a claim to be considered one of his warmest, most humorous and ripest achievements. Both directing and playing the leading role, he portrayed a middle-aged widower of incurable laziness. Pa' Belalang much prefers to spend the time lolling in bed while his seven-year-old son goes out and about earning their living. One day, returning from a hard day's work in the fields, young Belalang spies two strangers leading a herd of cows and goats through the jungle. From his vantage point he overhears them quarrelling over their shares of loot. Realising they are thieves, the boy frightens them off by pretending to be a wood spirit and seizes the animals for himself.

Meanwhile, his father, lazing at home as his son does his usual odd jobs around the village, washing up, splitting wood, hoeing the fields, is invited by two friends to join them at work. He declines their well-meant invitation and offers them coffee—only to find that he has none in the larder. So he blandly mixes charcoal and soot with water and puts it before them. Revolted, they make off, still thirsty.

Young Belalang returns with the animals. "What shall we do with them?" asks the gormless Pa' Belalang. "Pretend to be an astrologer who can tell the owners where they are," answers the resourceful lad.

The owners arrive escorted by the *Penghulu* to ask for advice. At last showing a gleam of enterprise, Pa' Belalang, with a display of mumbo-jumbo, looks into his "crystal ball", in this case a bowl of water, and claims to "see" the animals, although none of the others can. Anyone who cannot see them, declares Pa' Belalang, is a fool—whereupon, of course, everyone pretends to be able to see them. They run off, delighted, to claim them and the *Penghulu* gives Pa' Belalang a reward.

In the meantime the two thieves have stolen the Sultan's crown itself and other valuable jewels including his beautiful

daughter's necklace. The *Pengbulu* recommends Pa' Belalang as the gifted astrologer who will find them for him. Appalled at this unexpected development, the fake astrologer decides to run away, and, on the advice of his son, hides in a cave. By a coincidence which can only happen in a film like this, the cave also harbours the two thieves and their booty. Terrified when he suddenly appears among them, they take to their heels. Pa' Belalang returns to the Sultan and reveals to him the whereabouts of his treasure. The delighted monarch appoints him Court Astrologer and his humble cottage is transformed into a grand palatial residence.

Since this is a light-hearted fantasy, and since Pa' Belalang is a not unattractive man, there must be a romantic interest. So the Sultan's daughter (Hashimah Yon) begins to take a more than passing interest in him. They meet at night in an enchanted garden and sing a tender little duet about "glass turning into diamonds".

Sternier matters intervene, however. The Sultan of Masai, ruler of a neighbouring state who has always been a rival to the Sultan of Beringin Rendang where Pa' Belalang lives, challenges him to a contest of riddles. Whoever loses the contest will have to give up his territory to the victor. The Sultan of Beringin Rendang naturally turns to his gifted Court Astrologer for help once again. Pa' Belalang is petrified by this new dilemma. Restoring the Sultan's treasure had been easy compared with such a problem. While hiding in the cave he had kept on muttering to himself "O Body! O Soul! You'll die before dawn." The thieves, overhearing him, had thought that the spirit of the cave was threatening them and had made their escape. But now Pa' Belalang is faced with what seems like a hopeless task. He decides to run away.

He orders his son to steal a boat in which he can make his escape. The boy finds just such a thing on the river bank and

climbs in. A few moments later the Sultan of Masai and his retinue appear, for the boat is theirs, and young Belalang has no choice but to hide himself in an obscure corner. While there he hears the Masai astrologer detailing the riddles that will be put to the Sultan of Beringin Rendang—and, what is equally important, the answers.

Once the Masai contingent have landed, he slips away and returns to his father with a full account of what has passed.

Pa' Belalang does his homework. With much trumpeting and ceremony, the Sultan of Masai and his royal suite arrive and posture confidently. The Masai astrologer sets his first riddle, and Pa' Belalang, by now quite an accomplished showman, puts on an exhibition of concentrated, almost agonised thought. Of two ducklings recently hatched, enquires the Masai astrologer, how can you tell which is male and which is female? Pa' Belalang ponders meaningfully and at last comes up with the answer: put them into water, because the male always follows the female. And so the contest goes on. One of the most ingenious riddles propounded concerns Hang Tuah. Wherein lay his strength? Did it lie in his *keris*? Or did it lie in his energy? In neither, replies Pa' Belalang. It lay in the letter *ta* (Arabic equivalent of *t*) because if you can change the letter *ta* to *ba* (Arabic equivalent for *b* having similar forms except for the position of the dots), then "Tuah" will become "Buah" and "Buah" (fruit) has no strength. He gets it right again, as he does with all the riddles.

Once Pa' Belalang has correctly answered all the questions, the Sultan of Beringin Rendang is free to take over his enemy's country. The deposed Sultan of Masai reluctantly gives up his possessions. He determines to get them back as soon as possible and he commissions the two thieves, who have already played such a large part in this tale, to kidnap the Sultan of Beringin Rendang's daughter, the princess with whom Pa' Be-

lalang had his tryst in the enchanted garden. The thieves hold her to ransom on a distant hill where the ex-Sultan joins them with the intention of marrying her by force. Her father is in despair and conjures Pa' Belalang to find her whereabouts. The fake astrologer peers into his "magic" bowl of water but, to start with, can only see himself in the reflection. Then a curious thing happens. The view dissolves into a landscape and detailed picture of the place where the princess is held captive. She is rescued just in time, the thieves get their desserts, and Pa' Belalang, covered already in honours and rewards, wins her hand in marriage with the Sultan's beaming approval.

Pa' Belalang is, of course, a lazy good-for-nothing who sets his son a deplorable example and is notorious for his dislike of honest toil. In real life he would be a tedious companion. In Ramlee's hands, however, he becomes an endearing rogue, an amusing and colourful character whose ingenuity at avoiding work becomes a subject of laughter. He is one of Ramlee's most brilliantly successful comic portrayals. Able support came from Aziz Sattar and S. Shamsuddin, that veteran pair of comedians, as the two craven thieves. One of the many pleasures in this film was provided by Bat Latiff, a child actor who played the role of Belalang's son. He deserved equal billing with Ramlee, for his acting was an enchanting blend of guile, resourcefulness and sheer youthful high spirits. What became of this talented young actor? one wonders. He was a perfect foil for Ramlee in their scenes together, and with all his gifts should have had a promising future. Indeed, the following year, 1960, brought him the award of "Best Asian Child Actor" for his role in the film *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup*. The music Ramlee composed for Pa' Belalang, both incidental and featured, was as usual well tailored to create mood and atmosphere. Apart from the duet he sang with Hashimah Yon in the garden ("Kalau Kacha Menjadi Intan"), he provided a lively title song and background

music of exceptional effectiveness. When, for example, major events were boiling up, two notes, one high and the other low, were continuously repeated with a long rest in between. It was a simple device but one that notably heightened dramatic tension.

Another unusual aspect of the film that was, on the face of it, no more than a conventional comedy, was the episode where the Sultan of Beringin Rendang and his family were obliged to crawl in person through the cave to rescue the stolen jewellery. Whoever heard of a Sultan wallowing humbly on his knees in the dust? In such a way did Ramlee blend entertainment with impish disrespect. He had already struck a similar note of irreverence in *Musang Berjanggal*, the film that immediately preceded it, where a Sultan competes in an undignified scrabble with his four ministers to enjoy the favours of the hero's lady love. These unexpected quirks in the tale were not so much a sign of Ramlee's political beliefs as a pointer to the changing state of Malay society, in which the old tradition of unquestioning subservience to royal dynasties was fading away.

In 1960, the year following *Nujum Pa 'Belalang*, P. Ramlee found himself embroiled in the politics of the film industry. This resulted from his presidency of PERSAMA, acronym of Persatuan Artis Malaya (Malayan Artistes' Association), a trade union comprising both film actors and studio writers. It was the first organisation in the history of the film business to combine all the people who worked at the Jalan Ampas studio. In 1957 it had sprung into action on behalf of five members whom Malay Film Productions had dismissed after a disagreement. They were the actress Musalmah Kamsani and the assistant directors Omar Rojik, S. Kadarisman, Syed Hassan Sahab, and H.M. Rohaizad. About 150 employees had come out on strike, among them actors, assistant directors, electricians, laboratory workers, film editors, projectionists and other tech-

nicians. Passers-by at Jalan Ampas were startled to see lines of workers picketing the studio with determination but with quiet good humour.

The company refused to reinstate the people concerned, claiming that they were guilty of "non-cooperation and slackness". P. Ramlee and Jamil Sulong were two of the delegates who had called on Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the Chief Minister, in the hope of retaining his assistance. He proved sympathetic and sent his personal representative to act as arbitrator. The company replied that times were hard, that high production costs and dwindling revenue from the Malay population were damaging profits, and that in any case it had been losing money for the last few years. Whereas American and European films had a worldwide market of many millions of potential cinemagoers, the number of Malay audiences was tiny, and now that the Indonesian government had virtually banned Malay films from entry, it was becoming even more difficult to make ends meet.

The strike, which began on 16th March, ended on 8th April 1957 after the company finally agreed to take back the five members of PERSAMA. By 1959, however, the year when P. Ramlee became President, the union was in poor shape. There was the usual problem in such circumstances of members who failed to keep up their subscriptions and only "remembered" to do so when they needed PERSAMA's help in negotiations with the employers. Another, more serious flaw which hindered the organisation from the start, was that membership included unskilled labourers, watchmen and technicians, all sheltering under the name of "artistes". The union could not therefore operate properly as an association of genuine artistes and speak with one voice to improve their status. Moreover, as P. Ramlee observed, the weakness of PERSAMA dated from the 1957 strike, after which a number of dissidents

had joined the union. In 1960 there were only eighty-nine members, sixty-six of the others having failed to pay their subscriptions and having joined the rival Kesatuan Pekerja-Pekerja Awam Singapura (Singapore General Workers Union). There were also malcontents who sought to blame P. Ramlee for the weakness of the union and who accused him not only of irresponsibility but of dishonesty as well. He had had enough.

In January 1960, at an Extraordinary General Meeting, he defended himself vigorously. The accusation that he had acquiesced in the dismissal of twenty-four workers was baseless in that the incident had occurred before his time as President. He pointed out that the recent sacking of Neng Yatimah had been withdrawn when he personally intervened with the employer and obtained her reinstatement. After the meeting, despite requests to stay on, he resigned as President, although he agreed to remain as adviser, and Jamil Sulong was appointed in July as his successor. The weakness of PERSAMA, P. Ramlee opined, was that it had failed to expel those members who broke the rules and were disloyal to it. As he remarked in his closing address: "However tall a coconut palm may be, if it has already been attacked by *dedalu* (the parasitic plant mistletoe) it will certainly die." The observation is one that applies not only in the world of film trade-unions.

Chapter 7

SALOMA AND P. RAMLEE: THE LYRIC AND THE MELODY

IN the film *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960), which Ramlee made the year before his marriage, he sang a number entitled "Getaran Jiwa". The lyric, by S. Sudarmadji, ends with the lines:

*Andai dipisah
Lagu dan irama
Lemah tiada berjirwa
Hampa.*

In other words, if a song is detached from its melody, then it will be lame, lifeless and empty. Although, of course, Ramlee and Saloma were both considerable artistes in their own right, once they joined together they were unique. It was as if one was the lyric and the other the melody. They were inseparable.

Antara Dua Darjat was a romantic melodrama not without an undertone of social criticism. It also bore a slight echo of Ramlee's private life in that one of the characters, the wife of the high-born Tengku Karim, is not of royal blood and had been a cabaret girl before her marriage. The Tengku is a very

class-conscious landowner, and when he hears that his daughter Zaleha (Saadiyah) had fallen in love with the humble pianist Gazali (Ramlee), he instantly decides to put an end to the affair. Gazali is heavily beaten up by the Tengku's men and Zaleha is whisked back to Singapore where she is kept under strict parental control, and where, sad and lonely, she believes that the unfortunate Gazali has been killed.

The Tengku's wife, herself of plebeian origins, challenges his view. Zaleha's life is her own, she argues, the girl should be allowed to do with it what she likes, and that includes marrying the man of her choice. The Tengku and his son Hassan disagree and insist that Zaleha must marry her cousin Mukri. A heated argument follows during which, spurred on by passionate family feeling, Hassan strikes her so violently that she is killed. He is arrested and sentenced to death. Unbalanced by the loss of both his wife and his son, the Tengku is committed to an asylum.

Mukri's father then confronts Zaleha with a letter which, he claims, had been written by the Tengku. She believes it to be genuine and reluctantly accedes to the paternal wish by marrying Mukri. They leave and spend their honeymoon at Zaleha's bungalow in Johor Bharu accompanied by their close friend Aziz. When preparations are being made for the birthday party the piano is found to be out of order. A tuner is called in and turns out to be none other than Gazali. Seated at the piano and rippling off runs with polished ease, he serenades her while she watches him lovingly, delighted that, far from being dead as she had feared, he is very much alive and still devoted to her. One evening later on, evading the close watch that is kept on her, she slips out of the house under cover of darkness and keeps a secret tryst with him. They realise that they are still as much in love as ever.

The worldly-wise Aziz appreciates the situation and advises Mukri to give his wife a divorce since she will never feel love for him. The hot-headed Mukri flies into a passion, and, blinded with fury, plans to include Aziz in the murderous plan he is concocting for Gazali. From here onwards the film turns into a sort of blood-boltered Jacobean tragedy with spectacular fist fights and gun battles, all choreographed with a skill that builds suspense to the highest pitch. Gazali, having been shot once and ruthlessly pummelled, nonetheless emerges triumphant, and, a solitary victor, stands among dead bodies scattered around in a manner that recalls the last scene of *Hamlet*. At last he and Zaleha are free to marry and enjoy the happiness they have sought.

The cast of *Antara Dua Darjat* contained familiar faces from other Ramlee films. Mustarjo was there, and so was Ahmad Nesfu, a well-known *bangsawan* star, who gave to the role of Tengku Karim the air of authority which, however wrong-headed the old man might have been, made him a living and credible character. Aziz was played by the Singaporean Yusof Latiff, one of B.S. Rajhans' "discoveries" and a frequent name in the cast lists of Ramlee's films and of other MFP movies. Ramlee himself gave his usual confident performance, playing both guitar and piano and lending his golden tones to "Getaran Jiwa" with a persuasiveness that made it the hit song of the film. Yet if *Antara Dua Darjat* was melodrama at its most melodramatic, it also carried a social message which was unmistakable. The mainspring of the plot is class consciousness. The Tengku's insistence that his daughter must marry her well-born cousin is reinforced by his distaste for the penniless musician whom she truly loves. (One can argue that, if he is so keen on social origins, it is a little out of character for him to have married a cabaret girl himself. On the other hand, her presence in the scenario and the plea she makes on behalf of Zaleha in-

tensifies the dramatic impact.) Another social strand is to be found in the argument for individual freedom. A man or woman should be free to choose his or her own destiny rather than be forced into a union that entails unhappiness. *Antara Dua Darjat* was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that Ramlee incorporated ideas about the social order into his films. It is true that the story and screenplay were by Omar Rojik, a frequent collaborator with Ramlee (*Semerah Padi*, *Dr. Rushdi*), but it was Ramlee who wrote the dialogue and directed, and the story line doubtless evolved as a result of their discussions as the film was being prepared.

From the melodrama of *Antara Dua Darjat* Ramlee switched back to comedy with *Labu dan Labi*. This featured a character, Haji Bakhil (Udo Omar), whose name was to become a byword for tight-fistedness. Haji Bakhil, a wealthy miser, lives with his family in a comfortable home. His wife is a good-natured woman, anxious to keep the peace, who knows better than to ask him for so much as a cent. He is, indeed, so mean that he even sends his daughter Manisah out to work to pay for her living expenses. The household employs two servants called Labu (Mohd Zain) and Labi (Ramlee). Both are under the spell of pretty Manisah and both try to win her favour. Labu, however, is an odd customer. He suffers from a nervous affliction which, when he hears the slightest noise, makes him drop everything he is holding. As time goes on, thanks to his strange indisposition, plates get smashed, cups are shattered, and the store of crockery in the kitchen shrinks day by day. Labi, though not physically so inept, is a hopeless dreamer, his head stuffed with fantasies, and liable to drift off into sleep while doing his work. Both of these hopeless cases cherish visions of marrying sweet Manisah and of becoming rich men like her father.

It happens that one morning, while seeking firewood in the jungle, Labu comes across two robbers hiding their stolen treasure in a hole. He watches them from his place of concealment and, when the robbers leave, pounces on the hidden treasure and carries it away for himself. Once he has counted it all up he finds that he is now a very rich man. He styles himself Haji Labu and becomes the head of a firm grandly named Haji Labu and Company Ltd. His old companion Labi, who throughout their years of ill-paid work together had shared his dreams and ambitions, misses him badly, although the kindly Manisah tries to cheer him up.

The wealthy Labu sends his manager in charge of a deputation to Haji Bakhil with a request for the hand of Manisah in marriage. Pleased at first to learn of a wealthy suitor for his daughter, Haji Bakhil angrily refuses when he discovers that his would-be-son-in-law is none other than the former kitchen hand whom he used to employ. Outraged by the contemptuous rejection of his proposal, Labu goes in search of a *bomoh* to help him. The *bomoh* duly conjures up a magic spell which causes Manisah to fall ill. No one can cure the mysterious ailments from which she suffers, and the doctors declare themselves utterly baffled.

Labi, however, has an inspiration. Ever the loyal servant to Haji Bakhil and respectful admirer of Manisah, he travels far into the depths of the jungle and finds the cave dwelt in by a holy man of great powers and mystic skill. Labi explains all to the holy man who listens patiently and then hands over to him a magic stone which will solve the problem. He returns triumphantly, and, as the holy man predicted, is able with the aid of the magic stone to cure Manisah and restore her to perfect health. Such are Haji Bakhil's relief and gratitude for his daughter's recovery from what had seemed to be a mortal illness that he allows Labi to marry her.

Labu is furious at the news of his one-time friend's success and consults again with the *bomoh*. This time the *bomoh* produces a magic powder for him to carry out his plot, which is to abduct Manisah from the house after her wedding. Word of the plan reaches Haji Bakhil and he surrounds the house with guards. Night falls, a vague shape flits through the darkness, and Labu blows the magic powder over the guards. Everyone falls asleep, knocked out by the *bomoh's* concoction, except for Labi, who is protected by the magic stone which the holy man gave him and which still retains its power. Labu slips inside expecting to find the household drugged and senseless, only he is confronted by Labi. They engage in a pitched battle to the bitter end. It results, as to be expected, in victory for Labi, who is confirmed as hero of the hour.

This light-hearted film with its magic stone and wonder-working *bomohs* and holy men brought a classic character to the screen in Haji Bakhil, a name that incarnated stinginess. "*Duit satu sen kalau dikumpul boleh bikin rumah batu*" (if you save one-cent coins, in time you can build a house of brick with them) was the message of Haji Bakhil. He was played by Udo Omar who, in *Musang Berjanggut*, had already given a memorable sketch as one of the Sultan's pompous ministers. Mariani was the sweet-natured Manisah, and the film, an airy trifle, was given extra substance with guest appearances by Saloma, Sari-mah and Aziz Sattar.

Labu dan Labi was successful enough at the box-office for a sequel to be quickly prepared. Entitled *Nasib Si Labu Labi*, it featured the same cast, with certain additions, and the same basic situation. Once again we meet the two servants Labu and Labi who work in Haji Bakhil's household and who, though originally employed as cook and driver respectively, are expected to cope with all the odd jobs that come their way. And once again we make the acquaintance of Udo Omar as the

skinflint Haji Bakhil with Mariani as his pretty daughter Manisah whom the two odd-job men dream of marrying. In this sequel Haji Bakhil's wife dies and the old man is plunged into grief. Labu and Labi try to console him, although their attempts to cheer him up are by no means disinterested. Worse still for Haji Bakhil's condition, he is approached by various charities seeking contributions to their good work. Even in the best of health he is liable to be upset by requests for his lovingly guarded money, but in his present state such demands cause a relapse. Such is his reaction when approached by anyone he suspects as representing a charity that he immediately contracts a rare illness which knocks him out completely.

Up, however, pops Murni, a very pretty young lady teacher at an orphanage, who asks him for a donation. Dazzled by her beauty, the old widower gives her a generous contribution and takes on a new lease of life. Labu and Labi, impressed by this sudden change of mood, suggest that he marry her. When he proposes to Murni she accepts him on the spot. Haji Bakhil is so overcome by excitement that he faints. Not so her father (our old friend the diminutive Ibrahim Pendek at his most comic), who refuses to give his approval of the match. The infuriated Haji Bakhil orders Labu and Labi to kidnap Murni. The two bunglers kidnap Ibrahim instead and end up in court, on charges of kidnapping, with their employer who pays his own fine but refuses to pay for the two servants, who are therefore clapped in jail. These farcical goings-on are varied by episodes where Ramlee displays his boxing skills in the ring and Aziz Sattar gave another of his characteristically humorous performances as a bumbling *kadi*. One of the musical high spots was a duet sung in unison by Ramlee and Saloma, the spirited "Aci-Aci Buka Pintu", a hit number if ever there was one.

The two Labu/Labi films seem to have been a welcome relaxation for Ramlee after his tedious experience with the one

that immediately preceded them entitled *Ibu Mertua-ku* (1962). It is a bold true-to-life story of love, hatred and conspiracy told with the most striking grimness. This was a return to the theme of *Ibu* (1953) which dealt with family relationships. The role of the mother-in-law was filled with sombre intensity by Mak Dara, a *bangsawan* player who had already appeared in *Antara Dua Darjat*, with Ramlee as her repentant son. As was the custom in those days, Ramlee was paid around thirty thousand dollars to complete shooting in three months. The lump sum was intended to cover the salaries of the director, actors and actresses, singers and members of the crew. He failed to have *Ibu Mertua-ku* ready within the stipulated period and had to pay the extra cost himself. Since the production took eight months to complete, he was obliged to make several films to clear his liabilities, whence the hastily assembled Labu/Labi movies. His proud consolation at the time was the Golden Harvest Award as "Most Versatile Talent" at the Tokyo Asian Film Festival of 1963—he was actor, singer, composer, script-writer and director with the film *Ibu Mertua-ku*.

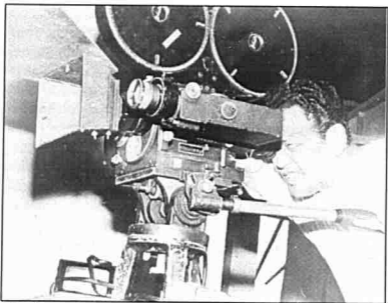
His time in Singapore was running out. The last two films he made there before returning to Kuala Lumpur were comedies that sparkled with intelligent humour and high spirits. In *Madu Tiga* (1964), which he both wrote and directed, he was Jamil, managing director of a prosperous business owned by his wealthy father-in-law Haji Latiff (Ahmad Nesfu, again, goggle-eyed and seemingly in a permanent state of bafflement—which is not surprising if you happened to have Ramlee as your son-in-law). After twelve years of marriage Jamil's wife Latifah (Zcera Agus) has produced no child, and her husband is feeling lonely. So he marries, in secret, the luscious Hasnah (Jah Haji Mahadi), having convinced everyone that this second marriage has the approval of his first wife. Just as the wedding celebrations reach their peak Latifah makes an appearance and creates

a dreadful scene. Jamil, in a panic, vanishes. The days pass while Latifah and Hasnah anxiously await his return. At last he turns up at Latifah's house, hand and foot heavily bandaged, explaining that he is just out of hospital after a car accident. Latifah is mightily relieved, above all when he promises to divorce his second wife. Next day he meets Hasnah, this time with his face heavily bandaged, to announce that he no longer lives with his first wife. Thus each wife is delighted to know that the other is his widow for good. The episodes give Ramlee an opportunity for some delicious fooling as he tends to forget which part of his body has been damaged in the supposed accident. His facial expressions and gestures are timed with exquisite slyness.

Having extricated himself from the difficult situation he now plunges into yet another. He meets the attractive Rohani (Sarimah) and instantly falls for her. Her father, a poor man whose only asset is his beautiful daughter, happily agrees to her marriage with this wealthy supposed bachelor. And so, for a time, by dint of playing off his three wives, he succeeds in convincing each of them that she is his one and only.

His luck runs out when the three wives meet by chance in a shop. They become friends and visit each others' homes. It is not long before the truth is revealed. A determined search through Rohani's house just fails to dig him out as he jumps hurriedly through a window and escapes. After a wild goose chase, the three wives corner him at last on a river bank where he threatens to drown himself. On reflection, they decide, their annoyance turning to resignation, that it is better to share him among themselves than to let him make widows of them all.

Fluent and spontaneous, *Madu Tiga* spins along at a crackling pace and never loses the audience's attention. It is a perfect example of Ramlee the actor at his comic and mischievous best. Roguish, youthful (though he was thirty-five at the time), he here deployed his inimitable charm to its fullest extent, and one



P. Ramlee – at the camera, Malay Film Productions, Jalan Ampas, Singapore



P. Ramlee and Zeera Agus in *Madu Tiga* (1964)

could easily believe in his ability to enthrall three women at the same time. Unselfish as ever, while playing his own role with brilliant effect, he did not stand in the way of others, and gave, for example, Ahmad Nesfu opportunities to show off his own brand of comedy, not to mention the three wives, each of whom turned in a clearly delineated character study. The three songs he wrote and sang to lyrics by S. Sudarmadji include the immortal "Pukul Tiga Pagi". It has a lovely melody, caressing and warm, that rises and falls in a familiar pattern yet always sounds fresh, as if one were hearing it for the first time. To see him perform it in the film lolling in a luxurious padded dressing gown, is to see Ramlee at the height of his powers, enchanting, seductive, in short magically irresistible. Yet even in so light a confection as *Madu Tiga* there is a sub-text. If the hero may seem to be a philanderer without scruples, the trio of women are by no means the gullible victims of male superiority. As feminists have pointed out, when he marries his third wife she quickly realises that he is attempting to use all three of them, and she unites them by explaining what this man with the roving eye is really doing. Women, as Ramlee portrayed them, were definitely not the simple-minded bimbos of male fantasy, but shrewd and intelligent characters well equipped to fight their own battles in the war of the sexes. *Madu Tiga*, moreover, won him yet another award for the year's best comedy.

The last film he made in Singapore was also a comedy, but again the slapstick was mingled with more thoughtful elements. *Tiga Abdul* (1964) once more featured that accomplished character actor Ahmad Nesfu. Here he plays Ismet, the wealthy father of three beautiful daughters anxious to marry them off to rich husbands. He sees his chance at the death of an equally wealthy acquaintance, father of three sons, the "Three Abduls" of the title, who inherit his estate. The old man succeeds in luring two of them, Abdul Wahab and Abdul Wahib,

into marriage with a pair of his charming daughters. There is, however, a condition they must observe. The marriage agreement stipulates that if either of them loses his temper and gives way to anger, then he will be stripped of his inherited wealth and sold as a slave in the market square. In this way Ismet schemes to grab the money for himself and instructs the girls to play his game accordingly.

It is not long before the Abdul brothers Wahab and Wahib begin to waver under the insidious campaign waged by their respective wives. They try hard to keep their temper in the face of increasing provocation, but in the end they are obliged to give way. Irritation becomes annoyance, and annoyance at last explodes into open anger. The harsh terms of the marriage agreement are transgressed and they must pay the penalty. Their wealth is taken from them and poured into the coffers of their greedy father-in-law, and they are hauled off to the market square and put up for auction as slaves.

What, though, of the third brother, Abdul Wahub (Ramlee)? Blood is thicker than water, and he vows to avenge his brothers' fate. His first step is to marry Ghashida, Ismet's third daughter. His willing submission to the terms of the marriage agreement delights the old man who looks forward to grabbing yet more riches. Abdul Wahub is, however, in a different class from that of his two elder brothers who were blinded with greed. What is more, Ghashida is truly in love with him. However hard Ismet tries, he cannot make the new son-in-law lose his temper. His attempts to provoke the imperturbable Abdul Wahub are continually foiled, and his desperate efforts to shatter the bland carapace of Ghashida's husband are rich in comedy. It is, eventually, Ismet who breaks down in uncontrollable anger.

The third Abdul emerges triumphant. It is now his turn to acquire the family wealth. Ismet and his two daughters go and

join the other two Abduls in the market square to be sold into slavery. Whereupon Abdul Wahub appears and buys them himself. When he sees that they are truly repentant his heart softens and he sets them free to share his riches with him.

Despite the far-fetched plot and the broad slapstick of Ramlee's screenplay, there is again a lesson of sorts here. Beware of greed, it says. Do not sully the pride and honour of traditional marriage. Avarice can ruin lives and destroy families. The parable *Madu Tiga*, cloaked as it is in humour, has a clear moral. It is also enlivened by the delectable presence of Sari-mah as the loving Ghashida and of Mariani and Dayang Sofia as the other two daughters, not to mention Ahmad Nesfu as the personification of rapacity. Ramlee himself was, as usual, agreeably nonchalant as the good-humoured hero. The song he gave himself to sing, "Tolong Kami", has an easy, ambling tune completely in character with the role he played: it flows with an effortless grace and lodges itself irresistibly in the memory.

Such was the forty-third and last film Ramlee made during his sixteen years in Singapore. No more would he visit each day the busy studios at Jalan Ampas where 150 employees, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Indonesian, turned out a regular stream of films under the management of Shaw Vee Ngok, a nephew of the Shaw brothers. There, as cameras whirred then stopped, and scenes were filmed and filmed yet again in the quest for the perfect "take", orders were continually shouted in Malay and Chinese simultaneously. Behind the lens, more often than not, was the chief cameraman Chou Cheng Kok whose expertise was so much admired by Aziz Sattar and whose experience went back to the days of Chinese silent pictures when he hand-cranked a camera for Shanghai's leading stars. A. Bakar Ali later emerged to be the leading cameraman in the Malay film world.

By 1964, however, the year of *Madu Tiga*, the golden age of cinema was beginning to lose its lustre. Both MFP and its largest rival, Cathay-Keris, were competing for a steadily diminishing market. Despite the brilliant salesmanship of the Shaw brothers and their massive organisation, audiences continued to shrink. Other influences came into play and kept people away from cinemas. Three years later the Singapore studio closed down. Its first production in 1947 had been the classic *Singapura di Waktu Malam*. Its last, in 1967, was *Nora Zain Agen Wanita 001*, a title which betrays a desperate attempt to cash in on the vogue for James Bond films. This half-hearted pastiche did little to rescue the studio, and the Shaw brothers decided to shut up shop, at least in Singapore. During the twenty years of its existence the Jalan Ampas studio produced a total of 147 films. Not the least of its achievements had been to introduce and groom P. Ramlee as the greatest star of South-east Asia, and one of the greatest in Asia.

But the Shaw brothers were not yet down and out. And neither was Ramlee.

Chapter 8

MERDEKA STUDIOS AND THE HOUSE IN JALAN DEDAP

THIRTEEN kilometres outside the city of Kuala Lumpur, nestling beside the National Zoo, there lay a two-acre site which caught the eye of the Shaw brothers' rival Ho Ah Loke. Like them an inspired impresario, he was, as we have seen, the founder with Loke Wan Tho of Cathay-Keris Productions and owner of a cinema chain throughout Singapore and Malaysia. Again like the Shaw brothers, he found business becoming increasingly difficult in the 1960s and was finally to abandon production in 1973.

In the meantime, however, he decided to try his luck in Malaysia, and the plot of land he espied seemed an appropriate setting for his new venture. He accordingly bought it in partnership with Dato' H.M Shah and named it Merdeka Studios. The opening ceremony took place on 10th May 1961, and soon the first film to be produced there, *Tun Teja*, was ready for showing. Operations were housed in two large hangar-like buildings clothed in drab concrete. One of them was dubbed Studio A, the other Studio B. From these gaunt beginnings grew the organisation that later became FINAS, the National



P. Ramlee (second from right) leaving his house in Singapore for Kuala Lumpur in 1964



The abandoned Malay Film Productions Studio at Jalan Ampas, Singapore



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the Prime Minister, with Tan Sri Runme Shaw in 1967



Left to right: Rima Melati, Dato' H.M. Shah, Saloma and Sir Run Run Shaw at the Asian Film Festival in Singapore in 1973



Left to right: Mahmud June, Rosmawati, P. Ramlee, Salmah Ahmad, Ho Ah Loke, Saloma, Kamsani and Musalmah

Film Development Corporation Malaysia, born in 1981 to develop and stimulate the growth of the film industry. The planning and realisation of the FINAS complex was undertaken by the Malaysian co-author while holding the post of Secretary-General of the Ministry of Trade and Industry (1985-1990). It is equipped with training studios, a film and video post-production complex, a spacious indoor studio, a hostel for students, a library, conference rooms, a small cinema, theatre, and the offices of various film associations. In 1964, though, facilities were more primitive. From time to time it was necessary to suspend activities when the floor and walls vibrated to the ponderous tread of elephants in the Zoo next door as they pounded their way for a nearby salt lick.

The Shaw brothers saw a migration of their Singapore personnel to the Merdeka Studios. Among them were Ramlee, Dato' L. Krishnan, Jamil Sulong, Omar Rojik and S. Sudarmadji. Ramlee went there with Saloma and her daughter Dian, and sons Nasir and Sazali, the boy whom Ramlee had adopted. Sazali's father, one of the many to whom the generous Ramlee offered a helping hand, had vanished and was never heard of again. Ramlee took the boy in without observing the formality of adoption papers and made him one of his own family. He was, in any case, too free a spirit to bother himself with documents and contracts. Sazali grew up as one of the group and was treated as if he had been Ramlee's own son. There was no favouritism.

The family moved in to a small rented bungalow at No. 22 Jalan Dedap, in Setapak. The rooms were small and modestly furnished. Against the wall stood a lean-to shed intended to garage Ramlee's car. It did not succeed in protecting it from the worst of the tropical rainfalls, for the outward wall was several feet above the ground, leaving a gap through which rushing torrents penetrated. Since then, of course, the building has

been converted into an elegant museum. But the gap in the wall remains, and heavy downpours still flood in to drench the tyres of Ramlee's little car which stands there in all its forlorn solitude.

In the Singapore "compound" where the Shaw organisation lodged and boarded its employees, there had been a free and easy companionship, with friends dropping in on each other at all times of the day and night to discuss the latest projects or simply to enjoy the company. To a certain extent this tradition was continued at the little house at Jalan Dedap. Guests came and went. There was little formality. Ramlee liked having people around him, even though some of them were hangers-on in search for money and the favours which they hoped their celebrated host could obtain on their behalf. Ramlee welcomed everyone, even inviting them to join him in his favourite dishes, *nasi kandar* and Penang curry. He loved the smell of dried fish, and, after eating, would lovingly sniff his fingers, their fishy odour reminding him of the food he enjoyed most of all. However crowded the house, however lengthy the meals, his mind nonetheless was always busy maturing new ideas. Of all the furniture in the house, the item that was essential to him, the one that he could never have gone without, and cherished the most, was his piano. It was at the keyboard that he tried out the latest melodies that were filling his mind and clamouring for release. And then, after a lively evening gossiping with friends, playing card games and savouring Penang curry, he would sit up alone into the night and early morning to write scripts and to plan the next day's shooting.

From Jalan Dedap, in what is now the Taman P. Ramlee which estate agents would describe as a desirable residential area, he would drive out to Jalan Genting on his way to the Merdeka Studios. There he was reunited with old friends from the Singapore days, among them L. Krishnan and Jamil Su-

long. Another was Aimi Jarr who had worked with him in the company Penerbitan P. Ramlee and the fortnightly magazine *Gelanggang Filem*. Aimi Jarr was then based in Merdeka Studios as an assistant director before returning to newspapers again and becoming a freelance scriptwriter, as well as Ramlee's biographer and leading light of the successful Variapop group of publications. As a young bachelor he often looked in at Jalan Dedap to enjoy the hospitable Ramlee's home cooking and to sample a steaming dish of Penang curry.

"He was a genius," says Aimi Jarr, whose relationship with Ramlee began at the moment when, a star-struck eighteen-year-old, he approached his hero for the first time. "Whatever he did was always for the future generation. He was a man with a vision. He knew the Malay culture and tradition well. He once told me that the Malays aren't easily influenced by outside factors. He tried to ensure that this culture is maintained by the Malays through his movies and songs."

Having made forty-three films in sixteen years during his time in Singapore, Ramlee began work on his forty-fourth at the Merdeka Studios. This was called *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (1964) and featured the chilling legend of the were-tiger, or "wolf-man". Ramlee doubled the leading role as the Jekyll-and-Hyde character who at full moon changes into the monstrous wolf-man and terrorises the peaceable inhabitants of Kampung Kiambang. The effect of his make-up was not enhanced by the crude mask he wore in his incarnation as the phantom tiger. It consisted of a podgy nose, a few bristly whiskers and a pair of canine incisors which made him look more like a middle-aged walrus than a sinister wild beast. More helpful in creating the atmosphere were the two duets Ramlee performed with Saloma: the leisurely "Mengapa Tak Berkawan" and the slow beguine "Jikalau Ku Tahu".

With his next Merdeka Studios film made in the same year Ramlee pulled out all the stops to please his audience. *Ragam P. Ramlee* (1964) had something to delight everybody: half a dozen songs put over by Ramlee and Saloma in revue-style, and two self-contained films within a film: a comedy entitled *Minta Nombor Ekor* and the drama called *Damaq*. The initial episode consisted of Ramlee and Saloma in a series of musical numbers to which they brought all their skill and persuasive charm. On the evidence of these songs alone it is easy to appreciate the magic such gifted performers commanded. At the age of thirty-six Ramlee was no longer the skinny youth who had made his debut in *Chinta* seventeen years ago. His figure was rounded out, his face was plumper, but any hint of middle-age was unthinkable, given the vitality and the beguiling smile with which he played, sang and danced. The personality that his admirers so loved filled the screen, although he was careful, with his usual generosity, not to overshadow Saloma, who took full advantage of the opportunities to deploy her considerable talent. He was seen accompanying himself at the piano. Close-ups showed fingers which, though short, flew up and down the keyboard with virtuoso dexterity. In another sequence he played the bass saxophone at the same time as, on the right of the screen, he appeared singing the words. The various rhythms throughout the episode included the twist, the waltz, the beguine and the "Joget Malaysia" which brought the proceedings to a grand patriotic finale against a background of maps and flags. Saloma's contribution was no less distinguished. One of her most delightful solo numbers featured a backdrop of streets and skyscrapers accompanied by shots of contemporary Kuala Lumpur—the law courts, the wedding-cake architecture of the railway station, the national museum. These views of the city which frequently occur in the films

Ramlee made from now on have a period charm all of their own.

Kuala Lumpur was not yet the gleaming metropolis of skyscrapers and soaring towers it has since become. The place was more intimate, neighbours lived closer together. This is the relaxed atmosphere reflected by the songs, notably in the *tempo riang* of "Hancur Badan Kandung Tanah" and the equally light-hearted "Aduh Sayang". All the numbers presented with such vivacity by Ramlee and Saloma, who never looked more attractive, breathe this spirit of intimate gaiety, and even the triumphant "Joget Malaysia" blends good-natured humour with healthy patriotism. And yet, although the music is now nearly thirty-seven years old, it carries within it a distinctive flavour of the essential Malay qualities which are very much alive and unchanged today in the cosmopolitan world centre that is Kuala Lumpur.

This musical sequence, in itself a valuable documentary record of a legendary partnership, was followed by two short feature films. The first, a drama entitled *Damaq*, was set in a village where the local belle, Kenanga (Kasma Booty at her prettiest), is betrothed to the hero Damaq (Ramlee). His rival Teruna lusts after the girl and offers a large sum of money if she will break her engagement. When this is refused Teruna plans to abduct her but meets his death in a grim struggle with Damaq. Kenanga persuades her lover to flee when Teruna's brother Bujang declares he will seek vengeance. Six months later Bujang returns to the village claiming to have assassinated Damaq. Kenanga believes him and subsequently marries another villager by whom she bears a child. Damaq, however, is by no means among the dead as Bujang pretended, and on his reappearance angrily accuses the couple of treachery. Once Bujang's evil plot is explained to him, Damaq sees reason. Moreover, Kenanga's husband, recognising that Damaq has a prior claim

on her, is willing to stand aside for the sake of their future happiness. The couple are about to leave together when the husband, carrying the child in his arms, comes to bid them farewell. Kenanga is unable to resist the call of motherly love, gathers the infant to herself, and returns to her husband.

After this concentrated and powerful drama of lust, jealousy, revenge, murder and the exaltation of motherly love, ingredients deftly calculated to exhaust the emotions, a welcome dash of light relief was provided by the second short film called *Minta Nombor Ekor* (or "the search for three-digit numbers"). This told the story of Ramlee and his pal Raden who share a room in a lodging house and dream of getting rich quick by trying their luck at the three-digit game. At the same time both of them fall in love with the shop assistant, the personable young lady called Safiah, who sells them the numbers they choose. They are also highly superstitious and given to the interpretation of dreams. When Raden has a nightmare they begin to argue about the number which they think the dream signifies. Raden is convinced that it is two hundred and four while Ramlee believes that the correct number is a hundred and two. The next time Raden goes to buy his number he comes across a very pretty young girl who winks at him. Flustered by this charming diversion, he forgets the number he meant to choose and selects another one. Alas, when the result comes up he finds that the number he originally intended to buy turns out to be the lucky draw.

One evening Ramlee is woken up by an unusual noise. He is surprised to see Raden walking in his sleep. He follows him to a cluster of bamboo shrubs where Raden starts to pray for winning numbers. With the aim of playing a joke on his gullible friend, Ramlee, safely hidden from view, intones a number. Raden is overjoyed and convinced that his prayer has been an-

swered. But once again, confronted with the beautiful Safiah, he falls into such confusion that the number he buys is a dud.

After which, on meeting a wise and understanding *bomoh*, the two gamblers come to grips with reality and the scales fall from their eyes. The *bomoh* convinces them that their dream of getting rich quick through the three-digit numbers is merely an empty one that will never come true.

Even though little more than the briefest of anecdotes, *Minta Nombor Ekor* carries a moral. Gambling is a mug's game, it teaches, as well as a waste of time and money. And as in all good comedy, the message is delivered with lightness of good humour. Despite the moral of the story, the Censor Board was unimpressed, and decided that *Minta Nombor Ekor* was unsuitable for public viewing.

Equally light-hearted is *Masam-Masam Manis* (1965), the film Ramlee started working on almost immediately afterwards. The opening is unusual and consists of a long prologue of about ten minutes before the screen credits begin to unroll. It shows a young woman arriving in the purlicus of Kuala Lumpur's ornate railway station and some views, now delightfully nostalgic, of the city as it looked in 1965. She is met by a friend and taken in a taxi to the "Lodging Mak Minah". Mak Minah is, needless to say, a dumpy, middle-aged character of comic potentialities. The young girl is Norkiah, played by Sharifah Hanim, Ramlee's latest "discovery". She has left her mother and younger brother in her native village to become a popular singer at a Kuala Lumpur nightclub. On the very day of her first appearance she has a quarrel with Shaari (Ramlee), her next-door neighbour in Minah's lodging house. The commotion of her early arrival wakens him from a doze after a late-night spree playing the bass saxophone and singing at the Copacabana nightclub. Their rooms are divided only by a flimsy partition (Minah's is that sort of place) and soon they are fling-

ing things at each other over the top. The noise they make arouses the other tenants from their sleep, and soon everyone is quarrelling with everyone else. This sequence is a brilliantly managed piece of comedy in which first one tenant, then another, are gradually joined by the rest of the lodgers in a crescendo of furious argument until the noise is such that no one could possibly remain asleep, not only at Minah's, one imagines, but at any other house down the street.

The comings and goings of Shaari and Norkiah are depicted in a series of ingenious gags where each of them, without ever having seen the other face to face, conducts a campaign against a noisy and uncivil neighbour.

The vendetta shows no sign of ending, for Shaari spends the day as a schoolteacher while Norkiah sings throughout the early hours at a night club. One day, while on a bus, Shaari gallantly saves a young lady from the attentions of a notorious pickpocket. The lady is Norkiah. The pair of them fall in love with each other, still unaware that they are warring neighbours. They enjoy a date by a lakeside and sing romantic duets—for Shaari, playing truant from school, is also a talented musician and leader of a band.

The time of mutual recognition arrives—one feels that ideas for gags to keep them apart are running out—and they face each other at last. Marriage impends, and Shaari, still unaware of his wife's nightclub activities, which she has camouflaged as "evening classes", begs her to give up the job. Unfortunately, Shaari bumps into his wife at a party given by a record company for whom he and his band work. The truth is out. Shaari, dismayed at the thought of the life she must be leading, angrily deserts her and ignores her appeals to return. One evening, however, he glimpses her coming home with an escort. Fired up with jealousy, he listens at the door and overhears an intimate conversation. He throws the door open and prepares

to launch a dramatic challenge to the man who is wooing her—only to discover that the conversation is emerging from a tape recorder, the scenario having been artfully concocted by Norkiah and a friend to bring him to his senses. The two are, of course, reconciled as hoped. The film leaps five years ahead to show him, now headmaster of his school, posing for a happy family photograph with his wife in front of a grand house and with a large family of at least five twins—or what looks like that number.

With the heroine as a nightclub singer and the hero as a band-leader, there were plenty of opportunities for musical numbers. These included the lively "Ai Ai Twist" and the patriotic number "Perwira". Saloma recorded the duets with Ramlee in playback and also had a solo, "Apa Guna Berjanji", its fluent, high-lying melody given a silvery resonance by her seamless tone. Ramlee had brought to a fine art the technical device of flattening or sharpening a note when it recurred in the repetition of a figure, thereby subtly changing the colour and transforming the mood.

After two years at the Merdeka Studios in Hulu Kelang, Ramlee had firmly established himself. Was it true that he had been persuaded to go there by no less a person than the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra himself? Rumour told that the Tunku wanted him to live in the newly independent nation of Malaysia. Whatever the truth of the matter, he quickly became the most productive figure at Merdeka Studios. In 1966 alone he brought out three new films.

The first of these, *Sabarudin Tukang Kasut* (1966), portrayed the misadventures of Sabarudin the humble cobbler. Divorced by his ambitious wife, who deserts him for a rich lover, he leaves his native village and is caught on the way to the city by a band of robbers who sell him as a slave in a bazaar. The wealthy merchant who buys him turns out to be his childhood

friend. Sabarudin learns from this happy-go-lucky tycoon that honesty is decidedly not the best policy, and, with the aid of a substantial loan, sets himself up as a would-be trader in jewels. The city merchants are impressed by the generous alms he gives away and even more by his claim that he is awaiting the arrival of a caravan loaded with precious stones. Anxious to gain his favour, they willingly lend him sums of money.

But the months go by and there is no sign of the caravan. The merchants grow tired of waiting and report him to the Sultan. At a court audience Sabarudin is asked to estimate the value of a stone belonging to the Sultan. Overcome with fright he drops the stone and it shivers into fragments. Instead, however, of condemning him to death, the Sultan takes his clumsiness as merely the nonchalance of an expert jeweller. Moreover, the greedy ruler, anxious to ally himself with Sabarudin's wealth, offers him the hand of his daughter, the Princess Sabarina.

Time passes and there is still no sign of the caravan. The Sultan grows restless. Sabarudin by now is genuinely in love with his wife the Princess and tells her the truth. She, moved by his sincerity, arranges for him to escape from the palace while she tells her father that he has left to fetch the caravan himself. Tired, thirsty, Sabarudin wanders the hills in despair. He finds himself at the bottom of a well that leads to a cave piled high with jewels and gold and every sort of precious ornament. Thanks to a magic ring and the assistance of a helpful genie, Sabarudin returns in triumph to the city at the head of his fabulous caravan.

So all is well? Not quite. Although the Sultan gives Sabarudin a hearty welcome, his evil Prime Minister accuses the ex-cobbler of black magic and declares that his apparent wealth comes from the discovery of buried treasure. The Prime Minister manages to get hold of the magic ring and orders the

genie to immerse both Sabarudin and the Sultan in the depths of an impenetrable jungle. He then proclaims himself ruler of the Sultanate. His reign, though, is a short one. The enterprising Princess tricks him into giving her the magic ring with which she rescues her husband and her father and defeats the villain. And when the episode is all over she settles down with Sabarudin to live happily ever after.

This exuberant *Arabian Nights* fantasy was based on a screenplay by Omar Rojik with the dialogue written by Ramlee, who, in addition to playing Sabarudin, wore a pair of vividly striped pantaloons that later gave way to a magnificent court uniform worthy of a princess's husband. Ramlee also composed and orchestrated the music, edited the film and directed it. With Saloma as his entrancing Princess he performed several attractive duets, including the lively "Seri Bulan" and the poignant "Bahagia". Not the least of the pleasures offered by the film was the acting of Mahmud June (later Dato), veteran of the opera stage, who turned the wicked Prime Minister into the sort of villain cinema audiences love to hate.

With the other two films he made in 1966 Ramlee left the world of period fairy-tales and embarked on straightforward knockabout comedy set in modern times. *Do Re Mi* (1966) introduced a trio of easygoing layabouts played by P. Ramlee, A.R. Toppel and Ibrahim Din. Each of them, apart from being unable to hold down a job, has problems at home. Do, for example, is harried by a nagging wife. Re is a house-husband who looks after the house while his wife, a nightclub singer, is away at work. Do and Re chance to meet at the labour office where they have gone in search of a job. A commotion in the street sends them outside to see a man, who happens to be Mi, pursuing a thug. They join in the chase, help capture the thief, and become close friends.

With financial help from Mi's girl friend the three set up as travelling drugs salesmen. Their home-made drugs earn a good response to start with, but gradually sales fall off disappointingly. Why so? Because, it soon appears, more and more of their customers are suffering from the ill effects of the medicine which was supposed to cure them. A number of these angry patients call on them for a showdown which develops into a wild goose chase as the comic trio attempt to evade their pursuers.

Do Re Mi having triumphed at the box-office, a successor was quickly produced in the shape of *Nasib Do Re Mi* (1966). The same trio appeared in a new adventure which opened when they happened to come across a group of ruffians beating up a young man while his lover looked on helplessly. By the time the police arrive the three heroes have been badly knocked around and have to go to hospital. Once discharged, they wander about in search of shelter for the night and find a house which appears to be unoccupied. It is, however, the lair of the gang who beat up the young man they rescued. The trio overhear the gang leader outline his plans to obtain a magic talisman from the local *bomoh* in order to cast a spell on the young man's girlfriend. Do, Re and Mi slip away and prepare to foil the plot. Re disguises himself as the *bomoh*, bestows a fake talisman on the gang leader, and instructs them to bury it at midnight in the compound of the girl's house. The scheme works—except that Do, Re and Mi are mistakenly apprehended as thieves in the scuffle that ensues. Fortunately the two young lovers recognise the trio and they prepare to trap the gang. The girl pretends to fall in love with the gang leader who is unaware that an electronic gadget is relaying their conversation to Do, Re, Mi and their helpers. There is a tense moment when the connection breaks down, whereupon the trio and the young man storm the gang's hideout. The police arrive and the gang is arrested while Do, Re and Mi are covered in glory.



P. Ramlee and Sharifah Hanim in *Masam-Masam Manis* (1965)



Left to right: Ibrahim Din, A.R. Toppel and P. Ramlee in *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (1972)

Only at the end of his life did P. Ramlee return to the care-free jollity he had inspired in the trio of *Do Re Mi* films in 1966. He had sterling support from his old partners A.R. Tompel and Ibrahim Din, when he resurrected the formula in *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (1972). He also enjoyed support from that splendid character actor Mahmud June, not to mention Saloma. Songs included the brisk and unforgettable march "Do Re Mi" with its foot-tapping rhythms, and the elegiac "Rantai Terlepas". There were also some enchanting duets for Ramlee and Saloma. One of them, "Ilham Tiba", in the film *Nasib Do Re Mi*, had lyrics by A.R. Tompel. Was it perhaps an indication of P. Ramlee's easygoing nature that he could work in harmony with Saloma's first husband? Or was it that his usually jealous nature in such matters was subdued by respect for Tompel's undoubted professional skill as actor and lyricist?

Chapter 9

LOVE, RACE AND THE FAMILY

IT was a sad coincidence that the third of the three films P. Ramlee made in 1968 should have had as its subject parental relationships. Although it was called *Anak Bapak* ("Daddy's Pet"), the thought of his mother cannot have been far from his mind when he filmed it. Che Mah binti Hussein had died on 4th March 1967. She was only sixty-three years old and had suffered from carcinoma of the jaw. Even so, she had outlived her late husband by some ten years. While her son had risen to become one of Asia's most famous and popular figures she continued to live quietly in Penang at her modest home, No. 4 Jalan Rawang. She was a woman of natural dignity. Her death was reported by the son she had had of her first marriage, P. Ramlee's stepbrother, a funfair manager called Sheikh Ali.

This reminder of mortality came when P. Ramlee was thirty-eight years old. It made itself felt all the more since for his film *Sesudah Subuh* (1967) he had to play the part of a young man. He embarked on a vigorous programme of slimming and restricted himself to a boring but healthful diet. Several months of heroic self-denial brought results. He lost the plumpness

that had begun to thicken his features, his eyes cleared, his complexion improved. He was ready for action.

Sesudah Suboh ("After the Dawn") was his first film of 1967 and could not have been more different from the amusing antics of Do, Re and Mi. P. Ramlee took the role of Ariffin, owner of a bookshop and newsagent. His wife Salmi (Juliana Ibrahim) is very much occupied with her welfare work and cultural activities—so much so, indeed that she is too busy for normal housewifely duties. Their two children are completely taken up with having fun. Over the past three years the family have not had a single meal together. When Ariffin comes back after the day's work he finds the house dark and empty. He feels like a lodger in his own home.

One day, he confesses his unhappiness at the state of affairs of his family to his Chinese customer Allan (Hoon Thye Chong). Allan tries to cheer him up and gives him tickets for the family to enjoy a cinema trip together. Touched by Allan's kindness, Ariffin reflects that although they come from different communities, they are both Malaysians by nationality and should cooperate in a spirit of helpfulness. Neither Salmi nor the children are interested and it looks as if Ariffin will have to go on his own. Just at this moment the Indian Chandra (Suriya Kumari) looks in. He is shocked by the family's attitude, especially by the two children's contemptuous rejection of the cinema tickets. His father Krishna Murthi (V.I. Stanley) rebukes them and reminds them that parents must be paid due respect.

An encounter with a Chinese woman by the name of Alice (Vera Wee) brings a welcome new element into Ariffin's life. She sympathises with him in his family problems and goes on the cinema trip with him. Soon she is preparing his meals and bringing him drinks from her own house.

Then she starts working in his shop and the business flourishes. Even so, Ariffin gets very tired and loses his appetite. When his doctor advises him to rest he suggests to Salmi that they take a holiday together. She is far too busy with her meetings, she says, and tells him to go on his own. Alice, though, is willing, and the two of them holiday in Port Dickson. Their friendship blossoms and Ariffin starts to feel well again. They laze the hours away on the beach and hold hands in silence. Unfortunately, Ariffin's son has come to picnic there with some friends and catches sight of them. He hurries home, tells his mother what he has seen, and urges her to divorce him.

Ariffin comes home to be met with abuse from his son. Exasperated beyond all endurance, he slaps him and reveals that he is going to marry Alice since his wife does not care about him and his two children are disloyal. In a powerful speech, he tells how, as a member of a distinguished family, he was disowned when he married Salmi, a former cabaret girl. He has, he adds, always tried to do his best for his children, bringing them up with love and never scolding them. Now, he announces, he has sold his shop to Alice's compatriot, Allan, for fifty thousand dollars and will be moving to Sabah, where he will marry Alice and open a bigger shop.

Salmi and the two children at last realise how misguided they have been. They go to Alice's home, and, on their knees, beg her to forget Ariffin. She refuses. "If you want to turn on the light, do it at night—you are doing it at dawn!", she says.

Ariffin and Alice are due to take the flight to Sabah. At the airport they are joined by Salmi and the children who have come to see them off. They must, Ariffin tells them, look on the past as over and done with. He prays that Allah will look after all three of them.



Saloma, P. Ramlee and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra at the Residency, Kuala Lumpur

Allan, too, is going to Sabah, and his arrival at the airport sets in motion the denouement of the film. He is, Alice tells Ariffin, her husband and also the lawyer entrusted by Ariffin's late father with the management of his estate. Allan hands over to Ariffin his father's bequest of four hundred and fifty thousand dollars together with the fifty thousand dollars for the purchase of the bookshop. Ariffin is reconciled with a family that has seen the error of its ways, as witness the pleas of Salmi and the children for pardon and forgiveness. Day has dawned and all is light.

The happy ending is, of course, too neat and artificial to convince. The repentance of Salmi and the children must have been overwhelming indeed to have made Ariffin change his mind about marrying the beautiful Alice. On the other hand, *Sesudah Suboh* has several unusual claims to distinction. It was, notably, the first truly Malaysian film to be made in the country. The cast included Malay, Chinese and Indian actors as well as a Sikh and an Indonesian. A key episode in the film occurs when Ariffin's Chinese customer and friend Allan calls in and sympathises with him on his unhappy family life. This is the cue for Ariffin, moved by his kindness, to speak about how important it is to work together and help each other in a spirit of national unity. Whether they be Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian, they must remember that they are all citizens of the new-born state of Malaysia and have both the right and the duty to cooperate happily among themselves whatever their ethnic origins. If it be true, as rumour suggested, that Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra had been instrumental in persuading P. Ramlee to leave Singapore for Kuala Lumpur at the time of Merdeka, then *Sesudah Suboh* must have pleased him.

Family life was also the subject of another film P. Ramlee made in 1967, although this time the plot took a farcical tone. *Keluarga 69* featured P. Ramlee as Osman, the happy-go-lucky

son of Bakar, a wealthy but short-tempered divorcé. Bakar, played by A.R. Tompel with a wealth of comic bluster, throws Osman out of the house because of his playboy behaviour.

Osman takes shelter with his friend the trishaw peddler Badim (Salleh Ghani) until the latter, unable to pay the long overdue rent, is thrown out by his landlord—who happens to be none other than Bakar, Osman's father. The two friends, homeless, join a travelling stage troupe and Osman soon becomes their star singer. When they fall out with the manager of the troupe a new career beckons for Osman who is sought after by recording companies on account of his wonderful voice. An attractive girl with whom he has fallen in love persuades him to sign a contract with one of them. Alas, he soon falls out of love on discovering that she is the fiancée of the recording company's manager and that she has only exercised her wiles on him as a means of getting his signature on the contract. Result: despair and suicidal thoughts by the hoodwinked Osman.

All this time, however, he has been loved in secret by the ravishing Siti Mariam (Siput Sarawak) who arrives just in time to prevent him from putting an end to things. After a romance they duly marry and Osman brings his new wife home to meet his father. Bakar, in the meantime, has remarried and introduces them to his wife, a girl in her teens. The plot explodes in a topsy-turvydom when the startled newly-wedded ladies reveal that they are mother and daughter. In other words, the girl who has become Bakar's wife has also at the same time been transmuted not only into his stepmother but also his stepdaughter. Bakar's housekeeper adds the finishing touch to this crazy grand finale when he introduces his new wife to the family and she turns out to be none other than his master's ex-wife—that is to say, Osman's mother.

P. Ramlee conducted this family farrago with comic relish. The film was enhanced by a lively song *Keluarga 69*, a pair of

beguiling beguines, and a slow rock number, lyric by A.R. Tompel, of lazy charm. One of its brightest features was the presence of Siput Sarawak. *Keluarga 69* was the last big film in which she was to appear. She had been a worthy co-star of P. Ramlee in eight of his films, and he was only one of the many directors who admired the versatile talent which made her a dominant figure in Malay cinema from the time in 1947 when she starred in the classic *Singapura di Waktu Malam* and for twenty years afterwards. Although in *Keluarga 69* she had a sympathetic role to play, she owed much of her reputation to the portrayal of tough, even evil women which gained her a nickname as the Malay Bette Davis, while her strictly reclusive private life encouraged admirers to speak of Greta Garbo when referring to her. Born in Kuching, she entered theatrical life when she was barely eleven years old and travelled with her father in the opera troupe Siput Kuyung. From there she went into films, and, although a versatile actress, tended to be type-cast as evil characters, with the result that she rarely had the opportunity to show her wide range of talent. Rosnani Jamil, who remembered her friendly advice when they worked together, remarked: "Off camera, she was nothing like the evil characters she portrayed. She was very lovable and down to earth ... Not many people know she was also a very funny person. She like to share her knowledge with young actresses."

Once her starring days were over she had hoped to become a director, something which, with all her experience, she was well qualified to do. The Cathay-Keris Workers Union objected, however, and she retired into her fiercely guarded privacy and a quiet life. The film business had not really treated her well. Yet her appearance in P. Ramlee's first film, *Chinta*, had inaugurated a long and successful association with him and had also been the occasion of her marriage to Roomai Noor. Long after she retired from the screen she liked to reminisce

about her young days in Sarawak and her friendship with the Dayang Muda, of whom she was very fond. One of her daughter's favourite memories was of hearing her tell about those early times and about her career in the cinema. "Off the set, my mother was still a perfectionist," Anita Sarawak revealed. "She had a strong personality and was very disciplined. I couldn't detect any weakness in her ... looking back now, I feel there is one thing I would like to change about our relationship. I wished that she had been more loving than strict and hugged me more—I missed having that. I wish she had expressed her love to me a lot more." The reason for her apparent coldness is not difficult to find. Relaxing with her favourite hobby of embroidery, puffing at the Kretek cigarettes she loved, sipping black coffee, she once made a laconic but revealing observation to a visitor: "Working in films is a tough job."

P. Ramlee's next film, *Anak Bapak* (1968) also had a family theme, although it was not quite so inconsequential as *Keluarga 69*. He again played the part of a happy-go-lucky young man. A free spender who runs his father's rubber estate, he is often in debt because of his luxurious lifestyle. The vivacious Normah (Ruminah Sidek), a nightclub singer, lends him money to help out with a passing difficulty. When she asks to be repaid he pleads for a few days' grace to raise the sum—which he does by telling his father Dato' Mahfiz (A.R.Tompel) that he plans to get married and needs financial help. The old man gladly advances five thousand dollars and Harun is able to pay off all his creditors.

Is the problem solved? By no means, because Dato' Mahfiz visits Kuala Lumpur on a health trip with his nurse Halimah (Roseyatimah). Where, he asks, is his new daughter-in-law? Harun pretends that she is back in her *kampung* seeing relations. In order to keep up appearances Harun "borrows" Edah (Noran Nordin), the wife of his driver Salleh (Ibrahim Din),

and introduces her as his own. Dato' Mahfiz celebrates by throwing a party. When it is over Harun takes Edah to his room and quietens Salleh's growing alarm by inviting him to sleep with Edah while he, Harun, dozes in the bathtub. Normah finds him there, profits from the occasion to blackmail him by threatening to reveal the truth to his father, and makes off with a cheque for one thousand dollars.

Unable to sleep, Harun takes a walk in the garden. There he meets Halimah, falls in love, whisks her away to her *kampung*, and marries her on the spot. In the meantime the cheque he gave to the blackmailing Normah has bounced, as he intended, and she complains to Dato' Mahfiz. He converts the hall of his house into a temporary court, and together with the workers from his estate, hears the case. Not surprisingly, Harun wins the day and Normah is found guilty of blackmail. Her punishment? She is condemned to marry Dato' Mahfiz.

Although A.R. Tompel may not have been elderly enough for the part of Dato' Mahfiz, he made up for his lack of years with an acting ability that effectively suggested a riper age. He also wrote the screenplay of *Anak Bapak*, as well as contributing the lyric of "Terbang Burung Terbang". P. Ramlee, who as usual composed the music besides writing the dialogue, directing and starring, also sang "Jodoh Tak Ke Mana", a lilting duet with Saloma. She was to appear in his next film, *Ahmad Albab*.

In *Ahmad Albab* (1968) Saloma's part was that of Mastura, daughter of the rich but hard-headed Mashood, played with flair by the ever-reliable A.R. Tompel. Despite Mastura's argument to the contrary, the proud Mashood refuses to credit that his wealth and good fortune have come to him from God. No, he claims, they were inherited from his father, and his father alone. Unlike her two sisters, who are married to rich men, Mastura is the wife of the humble shepherd Shawal (P. Ramlee), and loves him dearly. Her brothers-in-law spend all their

money on dissipation and are reduced to stealing. Even so, on Mashood's birthday they manage to turn up with valuable gifts while Shawal can only offer far humbler presents, much to his father's contempt. One day, as Shawal watches over his flock, one of the sheep goes astray. He tracks it to a cave where buried treasure lies hidden. When he attempts to take the precious items away he is prevented by the appearance of a genie who tells him that they belong to Ahmad Albab. Who is Ahmad Albab? No one knows, least of all Shawal.

Some months later Mastura gives birth to a child. Mashood is delighted to welcome a new grandson, although the baby never seems to stop crying. It only stops when Mashood, carrying it through the house, knocks at a door. The boy, declares Mashood, must be called Ahmad Albab, since *al-bab* is the Arabic word for a door. Shawal remembers the genie telling him that the treasure belonged to Ahmad Albab. He hurries back to the cave and is told that he is allowed to take the treasure on condition that he brings his son there once a month to play with the genie's own son. The condition is not hard to fulfil, and Shawal becomes a very rich man indeed. He is able to rescue his brothers-in-law and their families from poverty and to give them each a bag of diamonds to offer Mashood on the occasion of his latest birthday. When the old man hears the story of how Shawal became very wealthy, his former scepticism is vanquished. Yes, he agrees, his own riches and those of Shawal came to him not from any human intervention but through the grace of God alone.

The lavish musical score of this film included "Mastura", a touching little number sung as a duet by P. Ramlee and Saloma with the backing of a chorus. It had a distinctive flavour of folk-song, innocent, lively, yet strangely moving in its characterisation of the heroine. There was deft choral writing, too, in the title song "Ahmad Albab" and in the exhilarating "Suria".

The moral tale spiced with touches of *The Thousand and One Nights* was carried forward in a surge of high spirits by the players who took their cue from P. Ramlees' own exuberant performance, his features never still and expressing every sort of emotion. There was humour mingled with dolefulness, comedy mixed with apprehension, and archness blended with seduction.

The other film P. Ramlee made in 1968 was *Gerimis* ("Drizzle"), a somewhat baffling title which defeats any effort to link it with the plot and its social undertones. P. Ramlee had the part of Kamal, a talented artist at loggerheads with a strict father who dislikes his habit of painting portraits in nightclubs. There he meets an Indian dancer, Lela (Chandra Shanmugam), paints her picture and falls in love with her. Much to the disapproval of their respective fathers, they elope, get married in a Muslim ceremony and produce a son. Life is difficult, and when Kamal's paintings fail to attract buyers, he takes a humble job as a hawker of vegetables and fish. His father dies and leaves nothing for the son whom he has cut out of his will. Kamal's uncle, however, takes pity on the couple, invites them into his house, and makes Kamal manager of his property business while he is on holiday. One of the employees (A.R. Tompel) calls on a tenant, the alluring Tinah (Ruminah Sidek), and attempts to collect eight month's overdue rent from her. She chases him off with a broom. Then Kamal himself visits her, she plays for time, sizes up this handsome young man, and consults a *bomoh* who prepares a magic charm for her.

Its purpose? To bewitch Kamal on his next visit to collect the rent. The charm duly works, he falls madly in love and marries her. In the meantime Kamal's uncle has returned from holiday. He throws out the errant couple and Kamal is released from the thrall of the magic charm. Having come to his senses, he instantly divorces Tinah.

But Lela and the child have vanished. After a long search he finds her dancing in a night club. She cannot forgive him. Her father, now reconciled to her and understanding at last the power of true love, attempts to bring them together again. He fails. In despair, Kamal kidnaps his son and begs her to stay with him. When, finally, he decides to leave, she realises the strength of her passion for him and they settle down once more amid scenes of rejoicing.

This simple tale was embellished with two female studies in contrast: the flirtatiousness of Ruminah Sidek and the quiet sincerity of the Indian Chandra Shanmugam. Comic relief was abundantly supplied by A.R. Tompel as the employee who is ignominiously routed by the tenant with the broom. Even so, there is a message behind the film. The Muslim hero marries the Hindu girl in a Muslim ceremony, and the inference is a plea for racial harmony. It is true that, to increase the interest of the film's plot, the hero and the heroine must be separated and go through various testing experiences before their final reunion, but the ending underlines the fact that it is possible for a Muslim boy and an Indian girl to live happily together. The girl's father, moreover, who had at first bitterly opposed to the marriage, eventually realises that true love can conquer racial differences. A further hint is to be seen in the musical direction for the song "Temukanlah" which is one of the numbers P. Ramlee composed for the film. It reads: "Tempo Hindustan Sederhana".

So ended the year 1968, which marked the production of the fifty-fifth film in which P. Ramlee appeared. The following year was to see him collaborate with a man who is now one of the most famous names in the history of Malay cinema.

Chapter 10

PUPIL INTO MASTER

WE have already met Jins Shamsudin as a handsome young man who entered the film world almost by accident when he happened to be on holiday in Singapore. It was on 16th May 1956, a date he never forgot, that he first met P. Ramlee, who had just completed filming *Semerah Padi*. P. Ramlee arranged a screen test for him at the Jalan Ampas studio, after which Jins went home to Taiping where he awaited the call to arms. A fortnight later he was asked to come back to the studio. When he arrived, though, he learned there was no film awaiting him, so he worked for a time as receptionist and tourist guide, showing visitors around the studio, a temporary job which at least taught him how to find his way about the place. "At that time," he says, "I heard P. Ramlee was acting in a new movie, *Anak-ku Sazali*, where he was playing a dual role—a father and a son. I was so eager to learn from him that I asked whether I could follow him to a film shoot. That was the beginning of a close relationship." Jins Shamsudin quickly absorbed the basics of film production in the most practical way: on the set under the sympathetic eye of the man he described as his mentor. In later years Jins was to win academic prestige as the first Malay stu-



Jins Shamsudin - 1963

dent on the London-based Diploma in Motion Picture Technology sponsored by the London Film School (the guarantor of his scholarship was P. Ramlee). Ramlee soon promoted him from tourist guide to film actor by giving him an important role in *Pancha Delima*, the Cinderella-like fairy tale with Jins as the handsome young hero. It was a tough test. "I was so young," he recalls, "and didn't have much acting experience. So I made a few mistakes and blunders. I remember one particular scene where I was trembling when I had to hold my leading actress Hashimah Yon in my arms. I was so nervous. I had never had a girlfriend before."

"P. Ramlee scolded me harshly on the set. But the one great thing is that he never held grudges. Once the scolding was over, he was warm towards you again." Having won his spurs in *Pancha Delima* with a performance that charmed critics and audiences alike, Jins went on to gain further plaudits with his acting in *Sergeant Hassan*. In 1959 he appeared in one of P. Ramlee's rare stage productions, the historical drama *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat di-Julang* (*Sultan Mahmood Dies on His Litter*). It also featured Kasma Booty and was directed by P. Ramlee in Singapore. Ten years later he was to act in another stage play, *Sam Pek Eng Tai*, this time with P. Ramlee and Sari-mah, at the MARA auditorium in Kuala Lumpur.

By this time Jins was an established figure in the world of Malay cinema and had even reached a point where he could have differences of opinion with his mentor. One of these arose from Jins' prominent role in trade union affairs. "P. Ramlee didn't really like the idea of entertainers being actively involved in such things. Rather, they should be busy being creative, he felt. But I didn't listen."

Another cause of disagreement was P. Ramlee's decision to shoot his movie *Seniwati* in Hong Kong. Jins led union objections to this plan. "We felt there were many places in Malaysia

to shoot, why resort to a foreign land," Jins explains. "There was a fierce battle between the union and P. Ramlee." The result, he argued, would not be a Malay film centred on genuine Malay culture, and that "it would be very odd and awkward to see extras from Hong Kong acting in Malay head cloths, tunics, blouses and so forth." Jins and the union won. *Seniwati* is a story written by Run Run Shaw and the screenplay by P. Ramlee. It was never filmed.

Another point at issue was working hours. "P. Ramlee did not work regular hours and could not be compelled to do so: it was his way to work when he felt inspired, when he had imaginative energy," Jins said. "Sometimes he would work until two or three o'clock in the morning, writing the lyrics of a song or the script of a film, or arranging a song for a film or doing something else. Because of this he would come late to the studio, which could upset other people in their work." Such was the dispute that hastened P. Ramlee's departure from PER-SAMA.

But P. Ramlee was too open-hearted a man to let ideological differences come between him and a colleague whose artistic talent he admired. So in 1969, when he was casting his next film, *Kanchan Tirana*, he assigned a leading part to Jins. He could see that his former protégé had by now developed into a star in his own right, and he accordingly gave him the role of the protagonist, Kanchan, while he himself starred opposite him as Tirana, Kanchan's guru in magical arts. Based on a script by P. Ramlee, who, as usual, also provided the songs and incidental music, the film was shot in Merdekascope and related the adventures of the village boy Kanchan. The peace and tranquillity of Balik Pulau are shattered by a gang of ruffians who plan to wrest power from the chieftain Darmaji. On one of their rampages they beat up Kanchan and other village youths.

When Kanchan goes home he swears to learn the art of self-defence. Had not his father been a distinguished fighting man?

On his way to find a teacher Kanchan sees a man being ambushed by a troop of toughs and marvels at his powers in defeating them. The brilliant fighter is Tirana, a famous warrior though unknown in the village. Kanchan pledges himself to be his disciple and to learn the art of self-defence. The troop's leader, Sahamboi (Ahmad Dadida), decides to fight Tirana in open combat. He has, however, a beautiful daughter, Tilani (Sarimah), and she tries to dissuade him, convinced as she is of Tirana's superior powers. Sahamboi asks her to visit Tirana's house and find out more about him. There she sees only Kanchan but mistakes him for Tirana. She also begins to feel attracted towards him.

While Tirana all this time has been imparting the secrets of self-defence to his disciple, preparations have been going ahead for the competition between warriors that is held every year in the village. Sahamboi triumphs and proudly challenges anyone to fight him. Kanchan steps forward and in the duel that follows easily kills him. Only then does Tilani realise that the man she has been adoring all this time is not Tirana but Kanchan, his disciple.

Burning for revenge, she gains the confidence of Tirana and takes shelter in his house. She schemes to murder Kanchan and to avenge her father's death. Her plot misfires. Moreover, when she is told the full extent of the evil deeds committed in the past by the father she has up to then loved and admired, her feelings about Tirana change to such an extent that she falls in love with him. Her love is returned, and the happy pair leave Balik Pulau for their wedding.

On his return to the village Kanchan finds that the ruffians have taken control under the iron-fisted rule of their leader

Sang Nila. He swings into action, battles with Sang Nila and succeeds in deposing him. Darmaji is restored to the chieftainship and the village of Balik Pulau is once more at peace.

The collaboration between P. Ramlee and Jins Shamsudin worked well. Mentor and protégé understood each other and gave their best in a complicated plot involving mistaken identities. Sarimah, as the beautiful heroine, deployed an irresistible charm which had already illuminated some of P. Ramlee's most successful films, among them *Madu Tiga* and *Tiga Abdul* in which she had demonstrated a mercurial gift for comedy. In *Kanchan Tirana* she showed an equally accomplished talent for drama, as evidenced by her performance in earlier films such as *Ibu Mertua-ku*, and throughout the rest of his career P. Ramlee was to make sure that she had further opportunities to shine.

Before going on to collaborate with Jins Shamsudin again, P. Ramlee made a dramatic film that had remote echoes of the *Seven Samurai* which he so much admired. *Enam Jahanam* (1969) told the story of six bandits who terrorise a village, robbing, killing and raping the inhabitants' wives. One day they raid a shop owned by Tantari (P. Ramlee) who is away at the time. Quite by chance, while they are plundering the shop a photograph is taken of them. In their fury they kill both the photographer and Tantari's wife. Tantari returns to find the havoc they have wrought. Armed with the photograph, he sets out to seek his revenge on the six robbers.

Having plundered enough loot to live in comfort for the rest of their lives, the gang stores its wealth in a secret cave and each member goes off to lead a prosperous existence. Thanks to the photograph Tantari finds one of them, now the proprietor of an eating shop, and duly kills him. On his travels he befriends Damburi, a warrior who confides that he, too, is on the track of the six robbers and is, like Tantari, anxious to avenge the murder of his wife. They join forces, get to grips with the

remaining five criminals one by one, and so eliminate the whole gang.

Revelations now follow. When Damburi suggests that Tantari marry Mastika, his younger sister, the latter protests that he is still mourning his murdered wife. On being introduced to Mastika, however, he sees to his astonishment that she is the very image of the woman he mourns. She also happens to be his late wife's sister, as well as Damburi's, which is why Damburi, who has known this all along, originally decided to help Tantari find the murderers. As if to illustrate the well-known theory that a man always falls in love with the same type of woman, Tantari duly becomes enamoured of Mastika, the hitherto unknown sister-in-law, and the saga of the six robbers ends in a happy marriage. This potent blend of romance and bloodshed was adorned by Nor Azizah, who neatly doubled the twin role of Tantari's wife and her sister.

Nor Azizah was also to appear in *Di Belakang Tabir* (1969). This time, however, the director was Jins Shamsudin, and for once, P. Ramlee agreed to play a part under someone else's direction. Such a very rare occurrence shows what respect P. Ramlee had for Jins and his obvious feeling that the one-time protégé had become a fully-fledged creator in his own right. "I was afraid that he might reject me—that he might not like the idea of acting under a new director like me. Imagine my happiness when P. Ramlee agreed," Jins comments. "But at 8a.m. sharp he was on the set. That is the first time in history P. Ramlee ever turned up on set so early. Usually his habit was only to appear after 11a.m. I really salute him. He was so professional. He didn't throw any tantrums. He didn't mind retakes.

He always said that I was director and he didn't mind doing the scene until I was satisfied. He gave me so much faith and confidence."

Di Belakang Tabir ("Behind the Screen") was based on an original idea by Jins Shamsudin. One day, in the studio restaurant, he had observed a young girl sitting at a table. They spoke, after which she got up and went out. Soon afterwards she returned and happened to sit in the same place. Jins took up the conversation where they had left off, although the girl became increasingly uneasy. It gradually emerged that she was not the same person, but, by a million-to-one chance, the exact double of the girl who had been before her. This was the inspiration behind *Di Belakang Tabir*, in which a crucial turn of the plot depends on the exact similarity in looks of two different women.

Jins himself played the part of Osman, a young man just released from prison after serving a ten-year sentence for a murder he did not commit. P. Ramlee appeared as ASP Azman, the police officer who is charged with investigating an attempt by gangsters to kill Osman on his release. Impressed and somewhat intrigued by Osman's sympathetic personality, Azman invites him to come and live in his house. There Osman meets Azman's wife, Faridah, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Hamidah, the girlfriend whom he was wrongfully convicted of killing. When he accuses her of, in actual fact, being Hamidah, she vehemently denies it. Azman does not take the accusation seriously, believing that Osman's mind is temporarily disturbed.

A series of intricate developments in the plot eventually leads, through the identification of a crucial birthmark, to the revelation that Faridah is indeed Hamidah. She had taken the name of "Faridah" from a girl whom an unknown person had murdered, the crime for which Osman was wrongfully imprisoned. Her reason for impersonating Faridah was to inherit the property left by Faridah's father. All this she reveals to Osman in a confession which, unknown to her, is being recorded by

ASP Azman. She is about to disclose the identity of the mysterious criminal who is behind the attempt to kill Osman when a shot is heard. She falls to the ground and dies in hospital soon afterwards.

Osman succeeds in tracking down the mastermind, and, concealed behind a screen, hears him berate his henchmen for having killed Faridah when they were meant to finish off Osman. In so doing they have eliminated a valuable source of information which Faridah had been secretly passing on to them about police activities. In the course of the fight and chase that ensues, Osman finally squares accounts with the villain. Even though he had served ten years in prison despite his innocence, he had at least had the satisfaction of avenging the murder of his girlfriend.

P. Ramlee had pleasant memories of working with Jins Shamsudin on the film. "This part reminded me of *Sejoli*," he remarked, "when I played a bold Malay officer. I just thought of the 'boldness', not of the story. *Sejoli* was only about love, but *Di Belakang Tabir* was a tale about crime."

As for Jins, he commented: "I was really lucky. I benefited a lot because with P. Ramlee playing an important role in *Di Belakang Tabir* I was able to deepen my knowledge of directing films."

Jins and P. Ramlee were to collaborate in one more film. Directed and written by Jins, *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandung* (1969), ("It is Not the Mother's Fault", though advertised more crisply as "Destiny") was a drama about a barren wife. Though deeply in love with Murad, a young man studying in England, the pretty girl Ani is urged into a reluctant marriage with another man, by Murad's mother, who hopes that her son will wed someone of a higher class and better education. Murad returns from England to find his beloved Ani already married.

Yet her apparent contentment masks a tragic situation: her husband has been crippled in a minor accident and made impotent. When her love for Murad becomes only too obvious, the husband nobly divorces her so that she can marry Murad, the man she really wants. Within a few years, however, Murad's mother is nagging him about his lack of children. The truth emerges: Ani is barren. So, in secret, he marries a second wife. When Ani learns this she is distraught and seeks consolation from her first husband, the cripple. He rejects her. She had made her bed and must lie on it.

Sarimah played the part of Ani in the sombre tale which also featured the veterans Roomai Noor and Norizan. P. Ramlee had a modest role as a father. "He played very smoothly," Jins remembered, "and, although the part was not a large one, accepted direction punctiliously and performed as a member of the team." Jins the protégé had now become a leading figure in Malay films, and no one could have been happier about it than P. Ramlee, his one-time mentor.

Chapter 11

AN END—AND A BEGINNING

BY 1970, the year in which he celebrated his forty-first birthday, P. Ramlee had made fifty-nine films, fifteen of them as sole director and star at the Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur. How did he manage to keep up his phenomenal output, often at the rate of two or three a year? Jins Shamsudin (now Dato) gives a possible explanation. "One very useful lesson I learned from him was discipline. When Ramlee said filming would begin at seven o'clock in the morning, it was well to be on time. If you were late, he would punish you by ignoring your arrival or by deliberately letting you wait till near the end of the afternoon for the shooting of your scene, whether you were a famous star or just an extra."

Professional discipline was the hallmark of a P. Ramlee production. He knew everything there was to know about filmmaking. He could draw on a rare combination of practical experience and intuition that gave him a close acquaintance with every process involved, from the drafting of a screenplay to the positioning of a camera angle. He could write the dialogue and often the lyrics, compose the songs and the incidental music,

act the leading role, direct the other members of the cast, and edit the result with an expert touch.

But the film business was changing. In Malaysia, at least, it had entered a bleak period. Young Malays who went abroad to complete their academic studies were coming back with new enthusiasm and new interests. Hollywood films were increasing their hold on international markets, and the homegrown product was being squeezed unmercifully. P. Ramlee suffered perhaps more than most. Sales of his records had begun to fall away. His films were doing badly at the box-office. In the few years that were left to him he looked around anxiously for new chances to direct. No one, not even his closest friends, could offer any openings.

One of his oldest and most sympathetic colleagues in the business was Dato' L. Krishnan who had given him his early opportunities and groomed him for stardom. Krishnan had seen the warning signals of decline and had deserted the feature film world for advertising. "P. Ramlee came to see me with tears in his eyes," Krishnan recalls. "I told him to forget the past and the disappointments. I even asked him to work for me. But he was not that keen. P. Ramlee was a film man out and out. He was not interested in advertising. That was the last I saw of him. It is a sad thing that the last image I had of him was a sad face."

What else was there for him to do except make films, the activity to which he had dedicated his whole life? In 1970 he varied the routine a little and appeared on Radio Television Malaysia in a drama written by Abdullah Hussain and called *Intan*. Supported by a cast that included such old friends as A.R. Tompel, Mahmud June and Mariani, he played the leading role with energy and conviction. And then it was back to the studio again to make another film entitled *Dr. Rusydi* (1970).

Dr. Rushdi was a grim melodrama in which Ramlee played the eponymous doctor, a popular and highly respected medical man. When he discovers that his young wife Mariana is unfaithful to him, he is comforted by the nurse Muliani, who has always loved him in secret. He divorces his wife and sets up home with Muliani. In order, however, to avoid the scandal caused by this new arrangement, he fakes his own death and enables Muliani to claim the large sum of money paid out by his life insurance policy. His ex-wife's unscrupulous lover tracks him down and demands half the money to keep quiet about Rushdi's fraudulent act. Rushdi refuses and shoots him dead. He then happens to find his ex-wife in bed with another of her lovers. Vengeful and desperate, he shoots them both. The last we see of Dr. Rushdi, triple murderer, is a rain-drenched figure battling his way through a raging storm to meet whatever destiny awaits him.

The only moments when the dark clouds of this black drama ever lift occur in some nightclub scenes when Sofia Ibrahim as the ex-wife Mariana performs songs composed with all P. Ramlee's usual charm, although they were in fact sung in playback by Saloma and Ramlee himself. *Dr. Rushdi* seems an odd sort of film to be made by a star aiming to recapture an audience that had begun to drift away from him. Was he trying to compete with the crime films peddled by Hollywood? Did he want to show that he was much more than a popular singer of love songs? Did he feel that he could win back his fame by emphasising his gifts as a tragic actor?

He followed up *Dr. Rushdi* with a film that was equally desolate. *Gelora* ("The Gale") (1970) told another story of unremitting somberness bereft of comedy or light relief. Ramlee played the leading role, that of a middle-aged businessman who has retained enough of his youthful good looks to arouse the interest of predatory women. Since the star himself had just

turned forty, as witness his thickened girth, and still carried an aura of charm about him, he was to that extent well cast. Perhaps, indeed, his current preference for tragic film plots had been dictated by his awareness of the passing years and of how age had given him an air of distinction. It fitted in well with the gloomy atmosphere of *Gelora*. Here were family rivalries, a hated stepfather, frustrated lovers, and an old man cultivated by a grasping mistress for the sake of his money. The characters evolve in an endless circle where A loves B who loves C who loves D and never attain the object of their desire. Even the motives of their apparent love are tainted and range from the longing for a child to the prompting of jealousy.

Tragedy piles upon tragedy until, at the end, Rima (Sari-mah) kills one of the characters with a *keris*. She storms on to a climax at which she takes up a pistol in another fit of jealous rage and murders Raymee (P. Ramlee). The film ends as she telephones the police to report what she has done and asks them to call and arrest her.

Once again bowing to the inevitable passage of time, for his next film, *Jangan Tinggal Daku* ("Leave Me Not") (1971), Ramlee cast himself in a mature role. This time he was the magistrate Dato' Mahmud who is transferred from Penang to Kuala Lumpur, leaving behind him his daughter Tahira (Nor Azizah) who is secretly in love with Tahir (Ismail Mahmud), son of their humble maidservant. Tahir also moves to Kuala Lumpur, but in quite different circumstances: he is a thief by profession and much admired by the underworld for his quick wit and bravery. He likes to think of himself as a Robin Hood, plundering the rich to help the poor. But he is, in fact, just a squalid criminal—until, that is, the day when he discovers that his gang has robbed none other than the much loved Dato' Mahmud. In the dispute that follows he shoots and kills his accomplices before returning the loot to the magistrate's house.

Soon afterwards he is caught in a police trap and sentenced to death. Tahirah rushed to his side but is too late. He has already been hanged. In a surprise final scene, the Dato' reveals that Tahir was in effect her real brother and that she was only his adopted daughter.

Jangan Tinggal Daku has, in its way, a more satisfying plot than *Gelora* since it follows a symmetrical curve and the relationships between the characters are more clearly defined. It is also more believable in that the dilemma confronting Tahir is truly dramatic. P. Ramlee moreover, once the dashing young hero, but now clad in *songkok*, dark glasses and sombre dress, exuded a powerful sense of authority as the benevolent magistrate.

The last of the melodramas P. Ramlee directed in what were to be the final years of his life was *Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang* ("Broken Love") (1971). It featured the classic situation of a father (P. Ramlee) and his teenage son (Bob Mustaffa) in love with the same girl (Latifah Omar). The father's wife (Mariani) is paralysed and confined to a wheelchair. Her only consolation in an unhappy existence is her husband, and, to keep him contented, she makes the great sacrifice of allowing him to marry the girl. But when the son learns of this a terrible family dispute breaks out, in the course of which the paralysed wife falls down the stairs and is killed. Father and son are eventually reconciled and decide to make up with the girl who has stolen both their affections. A telephone call alerts them to the news that she has met with an accident. They rush to the hospital, only to have a few moments with her before she breathes her last.

After a brief excursion out of the Merdeka Studios to appear in a television adaptation of Abdullah Hussain's novel *Rantau Selamat*, Ramlee returned to the cinema screen in 1972 and directed what proved to be his very last film. By contrast with the violent deaths and turbulent passions of the melo-

mas that belong to this period, *Laksamana Do Re Mi* ("Warriors Three") turned out to be a joyous reminder of his earlier career when life was filled with laughter and sunshine, a sort of comic postscript to the gloom that had gone before. Aided and abetted by his old friends A.R. Tompel and Ibrahim Din, he brought back the three zany characters whose antics had delighted his audiences in the old days and confirmed his success. As an added attraction the film also starred Dayang Sulu as a beautiful princess. She was one of his "discoveries", a youthful artiste whose father was reluctant at first to let this sweet girl embark on a film career until P. Ramlee came along and, with all his persuasive charm, cajoled him into changing his mind. Ramlee treated her, as he did all his young starlets, with the thoughtful benevolence of an elder brother, and gave her every opportunity to develop her individual talents.

There are flashes of the old P. Ramlee genius in *Laksamana Do Re Mi*, among them a slapstick quarrel between the three lazy old bachelors and their landlord. A boneheaded policeman intervenes wearing a badge numbered "007", a dig at the James Bond movies which were just then becoming popular. Later episodes showed the trio triumphing in *silat* contests that burlesqued the *kung-fu* acrobatics of Bruce Lee. Through the intervention of a wood-fairy, the three men acquire a magic carpet, a pair of enchanted binoculars and a magic mouth-organ. The carpet transports them over hill and dale and mountain to royal courts where they earn the king's gratitude by rescuing his captive daughter from the clutches of an evil villain (Hussein A. Hassan) who wears a yet more evil, and gigantic, moustache. Here they tootle on the mouth organ whose magic strains cast a spell on the guards and cause them to jig about uncontrollably in a dervish-like dance. The king rewards them with high rank and promises each of them a beautiful bride. The three ladies, alas, are horribly ugly, and the bachelor trio, evading their em-

braces by a hair's breadth, leap onto the magic carpet, and, in a politically incorrect finale, are borned safely away amid the clouds.

Despite the primitive trick-photography and the atmosphere of improvisation, *Laksama Do Re Mi* offered appealing warmth and humour. Had it been made ten years previously it would doubtless have won acclaim from loyal fans. As it stood, however, this echo of earlier successes failed to please. Determined to find other opportunities and to retrieve the following that had once been his, P. Ramlee accepted an invitation from his former protégé Jins Shamsudin to take part in the formation of a new film production company called PERFIMA (*Perusahaan Filem Malaysia*, or Malaysian Film Industries). After a few months he opted out and decided to join Dato' H.M. Shah in setting up another production company to be called *Rumpun Melayu*. Since Dato' H.M. Shah had been the prime mover in the foundation of the Merdeka Film Studios there was every prospect that the new venture would triumph. Having promised to rejoin PERFIMA after a three-year period, P. Ramlee threw himself with all his old enthusiasm into the project. What made it all the more attractive was the plan to shoot a colour film entitled *Air Mata di Kuala Lumpur*. "He was very excited about his film project *Air Mata di Kuala Lumpur*," says his old friend and associate Jamil Sulong. "He had never directed a colour film before. That was to be his first colour film. Besides, he had never acted as a producer."

The project, in the end, never came to anything. It was the greatest disappointment in a life which had otherwise known astonishing success. All it gave rise to was the song he composed with his own lyric under the same title. The tune would have been the leading motif of the colour film that never was. Slow, gentle, it features a melody of sweeping warmth that rises high, expectantly, and then settles back into a mood of resigna-

tion. "Air Mata di Kuala Lumpur" was one of the last songs he wrote, and it is not impossible to sense, in the arch of the melody, a feeling of hope deferred and eventually turned to ashes.

In 1973 P. Ramlee was forty-four years old, an age generally reckoned to be the prime of life. Yet he felt strangely ill. Perhaps he was exhausted by the strain of writing, directing and acting in several films a year, by the administrative problems that harried him at every turn, by the unending search for money to finance the projects that were dear to him. He had, moreover, always played as hard as he worked, and there were signs that the machine was running down. He could not say exactly what was wrong, except for a general feeling of weariness and frustration that haunted his days and nights. Physically he put on weight, was slower in his reactions, and could not rise with his former vigour to the challenges that presented themselves. Eventually even the hangers-on who once clustered round him dropped away and went off in search of more promising targets. Only his true friends remained.

In May that year, he put on one of the few smart suits he kept in his modest wardrobe and joined a Malaysian delegation to the twentieth Asian Film Festival in Singapore. One morning, as he strolled past a *cermai* tree in the company of his lifelong friend Ahmad Daud, he stopped and asked, a note of pathos in his voice: "Mat, do you think my fans and the people will forget me?" Ahmad Daud was shocked at the thought. "Abang," he protested, "you will never be forgotten. They will remember you for ever and ever and ever."

A few days later, on 23rd May, he was applauded by the Film Festival audience and, as usual at such public appearances, made a few graceful remarks. Then he went back to his quiet, unpretentious little bungalow in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, that he had made his home with Saloma. On the evening of 28th May 1973, with the adrenalin of the Film Festival still pump-



A 1973 photo of P. Ramlee



P. Ramlee's remains being carried from the Kampong Baru mosque in Kuala Lumpur on 29th May 1973 for burial at the Jalan Ampang Muslim cemetery, Kuala Lumpur



The house at 22, Jalan Dedap, Furlong Estate where P. Ramlee passed away on 29th May 1973, which is now known as "Pustaka Peringatan P. Ramlee" (The P. Ramlee Memorial)

ing through his veins, he worked late in his office at Shah's Motel in Petaling Jaya.

At nine o'clock his telephone rang. The caller was his close friend Osman Abadi, deputy editor-in-chief of *Utusan Melayu*. Ramlee had asked Osman to write a film script based on his famous song "Azizah", and wanted to discuss it. His friend was too busy that night and suggested they meet next morning. In the meantime, he added, would P. Ramlee sing "Azizah" to him on the telephone? He was having trouble with the script and thought that hearing the tune would help him. So P. Ramlee sang the hit that had helped to make him famous at the start of his career. The wheel had come full circle. "Azizah" was to be the last song he ever sang.

He came home to Setapak, went to bed, and was soon afterwards joined by Saloma. He was, she noticed, very restless throughout the night. He woke up at half past four in the morning of 29th May and complained of feeling cold. A little later he became still more restless and was gasping for breath. She called an ambulance. He recited his prayers. "I feel I am going to die," he said. By then it was five o'clock. He struggled out of bed and collapsed on the floor. The ambulance arrived and took him to the General Hospital. At half past five he was dead of a heart attack.

The death was reported to an unbelieving official at the Setapak Police Station. Through the melancholy drizzle that fell during the afternoon a procession of many mourners, some openly weeping, trudged beside the hearse from the Kampung Baru mosque and finally to the Muslim Cemetery at Jalan Ampang. There P. Ramlee was buried next to his friend A.R. Tompel.

The Malaysian public awoke with a sudden jolt to the news that the *Seniman Agung* was no longer with them. As if to make

amends for the semi-neglect to which he had been condemned in his last days, admirers in their thousands visited the modest bungalow in Setapak to pay him their last respects. With his death, the light that had brightened the world of art and culture had dimmed. It represented an end, true, but in that end was also a beginning. From that day onward, P. Ramlee's reputation never ceased to grow, and the posthumous award of "Tan Sri" in 1990 acknowledged a contribution to the Malaysian cultural heritage which remains unique and inimitable.



Chapter 12

HOW THE BRIGHT STAR SHONE

Musician and Composer

Earlier in this book we have described P. Ramlee's youth as a reluctant schoolboy who spent more time travelling around with various bands than he did at the Penang Free School. Passionately interested in music, he mastered the ukulele, guitar, piano and violin, even though he had very little technical training. A fan once asked him what he did when he was not involved in shooting a film. He replied that he would be creating songs and playing music. Even before becoming a film star he had already won various prizes which culminated in his being elected champion singer of North Malaya in a contest sponsored by Radio Malaya, Penang.

When he was asked how he first became a film star, he answered: "... my involvement in the film world was a pure coincidence. It had never occurred to me that I should become a film actor. I use the word coincidence because it was in Pulau Pinang when I met B.S. Rajhans, the director, at Studio MFP (Malay Film Productions) and he invited me to Singapore to act in films. Initially I was reluctant to leave for Singapore but



P. Ramlee



P. Ramlee



The Pancha Sitara, from left: Saloma, Kassim Masdor and P. Ramlee (third)



From left: Saloma, Normadiah, P. Ramlee, Neng Yatimah, Mariani and S. Sudarmadji at the Asian Film Festival 1958

at Rajhans' insistence I relented; I left for Singapore and became part of the MFP family".

While at the Malay Film Productions, in addition to acting he sang, composed songs, arranged songs and lyrics, and led the Orkestra Kembang Murni. To a fan who asked how to maintain a voice like that of the famous male singers, he replied: "First train your voice, eat lots of fruit but avoid those with a lot of sap, and finally, take care of your health."

The Golden Voice

The popular songs he created were featured in movies produced by Malay Film Productions (1948-1964) and Merdeka Film Studios (1964-1973). He was publicised as "the movie idol with millions of fans" and as "the golden voice of popular songs". His popularity benefited from records issued by the HMV, and his early duets with Rubiah earned him the sobriquet of "the greatest Malay singer ever". Other singers with whom he performed included Momo Latif (her talent was for altering her voice, and her versatility), Asiah ("the nightingale of Malaya"), Lena, Sutinah, Normadiah and Saloma.

A dispute once arose with the record company. It concerned P. Ramlee's wish to engage adequate orchestral backing and lasted for three years (1952-1955) until agreement was finally reached. In the meantime, many of the melodious songs he created for the films he starred in were recorded by others such as R. Azmi, Jasni and Aziz Jaafar. Once P. Ramlee had returned to the recording studio, his delighted fans rushed to buy his records.

Where did his inspiration come from? He himself was not entirely sure what drove him to write a song. He was reported as saying that every song depended on the composer's feelings at the time. Overcome with grief, he could not possibly com-

pose a song with a happy beat. If, likewise, he was happy, he could not portray emotions of grief. He added that one could not force oneself to create a song. Inspiration had its own will. It came at the least unlikely and unexpected moments. However, in writing songs for films, P. Ramlee could not give free rein to his feelings. The songs he composed, whether sad, happy, calm or with a Malay or Hindi beat, were decided by the Indian director. As a result, it was common for the songs in a Malay film to have a Hindi beat. Nevertheless, when writing a song purely to entertain and without any link to a film, P. Ramlee preferred to revive the traditional Malay spirit.

Words and Music

At the time P. Ramlee emphasised the importance of fellow feeling between composer and lyricist. They needed to work closely on the nature of a song and on making the lyric fit the rhythm. Finally, once music and lyric had been completed, there was the need to choose the singer best suited to the song. Composer, lyricist and singer then met together so that, in the musician's kitchen, as it were, they could find the recipe and the seasoning that make a song a song before it is served to the public through a performance that captures the heart. It was P. Ramlee's experience that if the song he created did not follow closely the musical notes, the composer felt at odds with himself. Many a composer, he claimed, would feel happy and relieved should the song he wrote be sung as he wrote it to be sung. The luckiest composer of all was the one whose song was sung passionately by the singer of his choice. Only then would the listener be able fully to enjoy the song and be aware of its subtleties.

The lyricists who collaborated on P. Ramlee's songs were Jamil Sulong (now Datuk), H.M. Rohaizad and S. Sudarmadji. He composed a variety of songs with a Hindi beat for the 1950s

films made by directors of Indian descent. When he became a director himself he produced songs influenced by Malay music, including those with a *keroncong* rhythm such as "Alunan Biola" from the film *Antara Dua Darjat*. All the songs from *Semerah Padi* showed Malay influence (for example, "Sekapur Sireh Seulas Pinang", "Makan Sireh di Semerah Padi" and "Lenggang Kangkong Baru") and in a very short time they had become popular with the Malays. Some were accompanied by gentle, graceful dances which expressed the purity of Malay culture.

Indian and Other Influences

The P. Ramlee films made by Indian directors contained dance sequences, and many were choreographed by Edith Costello. Other Malay actresses subsequently emerged as choreographers for films directed by P. Ramlee or starring him, and the Malay dances they created added further charm to these movies. Habsah, mother of the actress Hashimah Yon, was an expert on the dance and had toured Malaya with a theatre troupe since her youth. An actress herself, specialising in roles as mother or queen, she showed another talent by sewing costumes for films about the old-time nobility or fantasies, including P. Ramlee's *Pancha Delima* and others. When P. Ramlee asked her to create a dance for his *Penarek Becha*, she recalled several dances she knew, among them the "Inang", a Minangkabau dance that had a swaying movement. She produced the "Inang Baru" dance. This was performed by six couples, resplendent in traditional Malay robes. Each of the movements and steps was gentle, orderly and decorous, and echoed the refinement and delicacy of the Malay soul and culture. This "Inang Baru" dance became fashionable overnight and was to take centre stage at every party, variety show or social gathering during those years.

Another of P. Ramlee's favourite choreographers was Rahmah Rahmat, who began at MFP as a junior dancer in 1955. He chose her to dance in *Semerab Padi* and *Pancha Delima*, where she demonstrated her ability to captivate with her dancing and her alluring voice. She later became lead dancer at the studio.

During a radio interview in 1965 P. Ramlee spoke about his experiences as a composer. "Apart from being a film star in Malaysia," he said, "I also explored other branches of the art, including composing and arranging songs, conducting orchestras, scriptwriting, devising screenplays and directing films, an activity which earns you the title of 'director' in English or 'Rihi' in Indonesian. I've also done some film editing and written background music. In fact, before becoming a film actor I was very active in music, mainly on the creative side. To this day, I am still very much involved in music. It has become a part of me, my flesh and blood. And recently, within the past ten years, I have immersed myself in films and have taken advantage of the various opportunities film-making offered me. Regardless of all that, music has always remained my primary mission. In this year alone I've already composed twenty-four new songs. People ask me: how are you able to compose so many songs, almost all of them popular? It's very hard for me to explain how songs come about. What I do know is that I've always trained myself to create, to hear a new song in my mind, a song that has yet to be, and trained myself to find melodies for it. Since the training began so long ago (I started creating in 1945 during the Japanese occupation), I'm still doing it now. I find that inspiration comes instantaneously. For example, the director explains the set-up to me, the young man singing indoors and the girl in another house, and the need for a sentimental beat. Given the director's idea, I can picture the setting and create a song that fits the situation. Many of the songs written outside

the studio are songs of general interest, although there are certain songs written specially for children. I am, after all, in the entertainment field. For this reason I have to write songs that can be acceptable to the majority of listeners, songs that can achieve popularity. Even so, one should not neglect to write songs that are educational and which pass on knowledge."

The movies in which P. Ramlee starred were the most lucrative of all. His co-stars were actresses such as Kasma Booty, Siput Sarawak, Saadiah, Rokiah, Latifah Omar, Rosnani, Normadiah, Zaiton and Sarimah, and there was much gossip about them among hot-blooded young fans. The Indian directors with whom he worked liked to include a scene where hero and heroine sang and danced in beautiful gardens, a standard episode inherited from Indian films. Especially popular were scenes of P. Ramlee singing and dancing with Kasma Booty or other actresses admired by fans. L. Krishnan observed: "Ramlee is not the swashbuckling hero type. He is the sentimentalist who brings pathos to the *kampungs*." The songs from the films were broadcast on Radio Malaya and words and music were often printed in film magazines. Since most of the songs were composed and sung by P. Ramlee himself, he was notably successful at conveying their respective themes and the right sort of feeling. Their cadences corresponded perfectly with the Malay soul. He composed many songs in traditional Malay music such as *inang*, *zapin*, *masri*, *asli*, *joget* and *boria*. Good examples of these are the songs such as "Inang Baru", "Gambus Jodoh" (*zapin*), "Nak Dara Rindu" (traditional Malay), "Joget Pahang" and "Alunan Biola" (*keroncong*).

P. Ramlee was also remarkably adept at mixing and adapting foreign musical styles to Malay songs, among them the waltz in "Tidurku di Rumpit Yang Basah"; Middle Eastern elements in "Ya Habibi Ali Baba" and Chinese influences in "Hoi-Hoi Ya-Hoi Lagu Penyamun". The various rhythms he

utilised included the samba ("Nasi Goreng"); beguine ("Merak Kayangan"); andante ("Mengapa Riang Ria"); bolero ("Ju-wita"); rumba ("Bila Larut Malam"); slow beguine ("Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang"); slow rumba ("Hamidah"); twist ("Bunyi Gitar"); and mambo ("Kwek Mambo").

In several of his films he portrayed the lives of artistes. In *Ibu* he took the role of a musician and played the saxophone. Other roles included that of another saxophonist (Kassim Selamat in *Ibu Mertua-ku*), and of a pianist (Ghazali in *Antara Dua Darjat*). As an artiste himself he was particularly suited to the role of singer, composer or instrumentalist.

In Tune with Changing Times

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s young Malays were becoming less and less interested in purely Malay songs and more and more enthusiastic about the Beatles and other pop idols. P. Ramlee fought back by forming a band called Pancha Sitara with the aim of revitalising Malay music and combating the influence of the Platters. Pancha Sitara was well received and recorded such favourite songs as "Bila Larut Malam", "Mawar Ku" and many others. A movement called "Pop Yeh Yeh" subsequently emerged. This was represented by bands using four electric guitars and known under the shortened name of "Kugiran". P. Ramlee sounded a warning note, however. "This kind of music," he said, "placed importance only on the loudness of the music rather than the quality of the song itself."

P. Ramlee nonetheless succeeded in adapting to changes and in maintaining his position. He even recorded several songs accompanied by the four-guitar bands, based on youth movements led by Jefri Din, A. Ramli, L. Ramlee, S. Mariam, Jaafar O and others. Once again, though, he issued a warning! "Poor quality pop songs and music will give rise to a future gen-

eration that is wild. Young people who sing as they please, play music as they please, dress themselves as they please," he said, "will end up exposed to negative elements which will inevitably result in all ill discipline".

P. Ramlee's chief consideration was the quality, and especially the vocal quality, of a song. His personal touch captured the hearts of those who liked modern songs and music such as "twist". Up to now his most popular songs remain "Bunyi Gitar" (*Tiga Abdul*, 1964) and "Ai Ai Twist" (*Masam-Masam Manis*, 1965). Even so, some of his songs inspired controversy. As we have already seen in Chapter 4, the song "Kelasi" (*Sedarah*, 1952) so annoyed the Union of Sailors in Malaya that they registered an official complaint describing the "lewd and derogatory" words as an insult to Malay seamen. Ten years later, although P. Ramlee's compositions in the film *Hang Tuah* won the "Best Music" Award at the Asian Film Festival in Hong Kong, critics objected that the Portuguese "gramio" rhythm used for one of the songs was incorrect, since at the time of the legendary character Hang Tuah, the Portuguese had not yet occupied Malacca. They also claimed that the name "Johor" and the use of the *joget* beat in the song "Joget Pahang" were further anachronisms.

P. Ramlee won many plaudits, among them the "Best Song" award of 1955 for "Inang Baru" (*Penarek Becha*) and the "Best Song Composer" and "Best Male Singer" titles awarded in 1956 by readers of the *Bintang* magazine, who also, in 1960, voted his song "Jangan Angan-Angan" the "Most Popular Song". It is interesting to note how P. Ramlee stressed the importance of lyrics. Writing in *Gelanggang Filem* (October 1960), he observed that "the lyric of every song should not be taken lightly since it is intended to have its effect on the human heart ... in addition to the customary romantic lyrics we need

those that inspire the spirit to work hard, to espouse honourable causes, and to love our homeland and our race."

Songs that are "Evergreen"

P. Ramlee's own lyrics are particularly suited to the songs he wrote, such as the "tongue-in-cheek" words he supplied for "Nasi Goreng" (*Chemburu*, 1962), "Maafkan Kami" and "Pok-Pok Bujang Lapok" (*Pendekar Bujang Lapok*, 1959) and "Do Re Mi" (1966). Other lyrics he wrote for popular songs include "Di Pinggiran" (*Ragam P. Ramlee*, 1965), "Entah di Mana" (*Keluarga 69*, 1967) and "Assalamualaikum" (*Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang*, 1971).

Another category of music is the marching song, which, even in the early Islamic period, played a big role in arousing the spirit. Certain types of music and singing which stirred the soul were highly regarded, and drumbeats and inspirational songs accompanied warriors to the battlefields. Patriotic spirit is shown in P. Ramlee songs like "Pahlawanku", "Perwira" and "Sekapur Sireh", all sung by Saloma. A similar inspiration colours "Joget Malaysia" in *Ragam P. Ramlee* and "Joget Pahang" and "Melaka", sung by P. Ramlee in the film *Hang Tuah*.

Also to be mentioned are songs performed by groups such as "Kenek-Kenek Udang", and songs which pass on advice and knowledge like "Rukun Islam" and "Tolong Kami". Ballads which speak of love are "Merak Kayangan" (*Hujan Panas*, 1953) and "Tidur-lah Permaisuri" (*Putus Harapan*, 1953). Examples of "evergreens" by P. Ramlee include "Dendang Perantau", which is to be heard on television and radio during the Id celebrations. Weddings are often accompanied by "Di Renjis-Renjis di Pilis" (*Takdir Illabi*, 1950), "Merpati Dua Sejoli" (*Bakti*, 1950) and "Selamat Pengantin Baru" (*Madu Tiga*, 1964) (sung by Saloma).

Compact disc recordings, digitally re-mastered, are now available under the following titles: (i) *Greatest Hits from the Theatre*; (ii) *P. Ramlee's Greatest Hits Collection*; (iii) *P. Ramlee's Greatest Hits Collection: Songs and Films*; (iv) *P. Ramlee's Greatest Hits Collection: Love Songs*; (v) *Tan Sri P. Ramlee: Evergreen Series: Vol. II*; (vi) *P. Ramlee: 25 Years Without You: 1973-1998*; and (vii) *The Legacy of Tan Sri P. Ramlee* (titles translated from the Malay language).

"Getaran Jiwa" (*Antara Dua Darjat*, 1960) is acknowledged as a masterpiece, both by the various races in Malaysia and internationally. In an album containing his greatest songs, the English singer Lobo featured an English version called "Whispering in the Winds". Further proof that P. Ramlee's music transcends language, culture and geographical borders is given by international orchestras which have adapted his songs to classical forms. "Bunga Melor" has been added to the repertory of the Royal Swedish Chamber Orchestra, and, already mesmerising in its original version, has greatly enhanced its gaiety with cleverly scored stringed instruments. The Bolshoi Ballet of Tashkent, famous for its performances worldwide, has adapted sixteen of P. Ramlee's songs in classical form. The Orchestra is one of only three former Soviet theatre companies to be honoured with the title "Bolshoi", meaning the greatest, the best, the highest. The songs selected represent various themes, tragic, romantic and comic. They are: "Mencece Bujang Lapok", "Di Mana Suara Burung Kenari", "Getaran Jiwa", "Putus Sudah Kasah Sayang", "Barang Yang Lepas Jangan di Kenang", "Yang Mana Satu Idaman Kalbu", "Jangan Tinggal Daku", "Tolong Kami", "Bila Mama Pakai Celana", "Senjakala", "Pukul Tiga Pagi", "Mengapa Derita", "Dendang Perantau", "Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti", "Aci-Aci Buka Pintu" and "Bunga Melor".

Japan, too, has come under the spell of P. Ramlee. The Japanese artiste Kako Shimada sang "Jeritan Batin-ku" in her second album, *Robin 99* (1998), in an English version called "Indian Summer".

In 1973, towards the end of his life, P. Ramlee composed more than twenty new songs to be recorded by talented singers, namely Mimi Loma and Suhaily Shamsuddin, and a few others. These new songs included "Terima Kasih Banyak-Banyak", "Surat Cinta", "Rembang Petang di Malaysia", "Siapa Nama Kanda", and "Epok-Epok". They were recorded by the Great Union Orkes (GUO) with accompaniments from the Ben Puteh Orchestra led by P. Ramlee himself. He was, by now, a legend. Without the benefit of any formal education in music or acting, he had become a rare example of inborn genius achieving renown in the spheres of music, acting and directing.

In a newspaper interview in the year of his death (1973), P. Ramlee said: "It is my heartfelt desire that the songs I have created will be preserved for posterity and will be appropriate at all times." He added that he hoped the singers who performed them would respect their quality to help them survive the passage of time, which was the reason he had composed them. "Many contemporary composers write songs which do not respect the musical notes," he remarked. "That is why their songs fade and are unable to stand up to the passing years." He urged lyricists and composers to write songs in accordance with the musical notes and not simply to follow their whims. When asked if the decline in the quality of current pop songs was the direct result of composers failing to do this, he replied: "That is certainly the cause and the reason."

Such was the verdict of a composer whose own songs are as fresh and immediate in their appeal as they were when they were first heard thirty, forty and even fifty years ago.

P. Ramlee the Actor

In his youth P. Ramlee enjoyed the films of such Hollywood stars as Tom Mix and Buck Jones and dreamed of film fame. After his arrival in Singapore in 1948, his screen test won him a small part in *Chinta* (1948). During an initial contract lasting two years he appeared in eight films. He quickly showed a remarkable versatility, playing a villain in *Chinta*, a musician in *Noor Asmara* (1949), a comedian in *Nasib* (1949) and *Nilam* (1949) and a villain once again in *Rachun Dunia* (1950). The director L. Krishnan chose him as leading man for *Bakti* (1950) and *Takdir Illahi* (1950). Ever modest and willing to work as a team player, P. Ramlee was a supporting actor in *Aloha* (1950).

P. Ramlee once confessed that "Even though the income earned from acting during those two years was not very satisfactory, it had its attendant joys as I was given the chance to make records of my songs." When his two-year contract ended he took up a new contract with Malay Film Productions. "This time the agreement left me pondering for a moment as the pay increase was again unsatisfactory—only two hundred dollars a month and as little as two hundred and fifty dollars on completion of every film I acted in Not only was my income unsatisfactory, but I was also forbidden to record my songs with a recording company."

The Shaw brothers who ran MFP employed actors on a detailed contractual basis. The terms of their contracts were very strict and bound the actor to be under the total control of the company, both in his professional and his private life. There was even a clause which laid it down that he should wear his own clothes where street clothes were to be worn in the film.

After P. Ramlee had gained the trust of the producer and his fame had grown, his initial salary of two hundred and fifty dollars a month was increased to six hundred dollars. He was also entitled to a bonus depending on his popularity. At this

peak he was receiving a bonus of thirty thousand dollars on a film. Success came to him very quickly. Although it was B.S. Rajhans who introduced him to cinema, L. Krishnan was the one who made him a film star. His first role was very small, but he willingly submitted to playing a minor part and to being ordered around because he was anxious to learn the ropes and to profit from guidance by experienced people. The film *Takdir Illahi* directed by L. Krishnan confirmed P. Ramlee's reputation and set his foot on the ladder to fame.

Box-office Hits

Although he was not immune to criticism—his acting in *Anjoran Nasib* was thought by a critic to be unconvincing—nearly all his films turned out by MFP resulted in box-office hits. His appearance, his singing and even his dancing reinforced his ability to play a hero who could captivate the heroine with his gracious wooing. He often took the role of a romantic young man who won over his lover after exciting fights and scenes where he charmed with his songs. Malay audiences at that time were very fond of films about love. For his admirers, P. Ramlee was not just a film star but also a character with whom they could identify. To be “in love” like P. Ramlee was the chief ambition of his male fans.

P. Ramlee once disclosed that he had often studied the acting of British and American films stars. His favourite, he said, was the English actor Stewart Granger. Others were the Hollywood star Marlon Brando and the Malay *bangsawan* artiste Ahmad Nesfu, the latter often cast in films by P. Ramlee when he became a director. A contemporary writer pointed out that, when compared with Western actors, P. Ramlee, with his dusky skin and brown eyes, did not have a large build, stood at 5 feet 7 inches and weighed only 140 pounds. However, like Errol Flynn with his sword defeating Basil Rathbone as the wicked

Sheriff in *Robin Hood*, P. Ramlee trounced his enemies effortlessly before winning through to the heroine. Besides, the writer added, P. Ramlee was a competent actor whereas Errol Flynn was not distinguished for his acting ability.

The Indian directors responsible for the P. Ramlee films were men of great experience and creative ability. They included L. Krishnan, whom we have already mentioned, Phani Majumdar, B.N. Rao, S. Ramanathan, K.M. Basker and B.S. Rajhans. B.N. Rao was the director of *Hujan Panas* which in 1953 was voted by the readers of *Utusan Filem dan Sport* as "best film of the year" with P. Ramlee as "Best actor". In 1956 Phani Majumdar directed him in *Anak-ku Sazali* in which P. Ramlee gave an outstanding performance as both a father and his son. This brought him acclaim as "Best Actor" at the Asian Film Festival.

Another nationality was represented by Lamberto V. Avelana, the Filipino director responsible for *Sergeant Hassan*. He returned to his homeland before the film was completed and ready for screening, and it was left to P. Ramlee to edit the material and to re-shoot various small sections.

The talented actresses with whom P. Ramlee was paired involved such names as Kasma Booty, Siput Sarawak, Rokiah, Neng Yatimah, Rosnani, Saadiah, Aini Hayati, Normadiah, Sarimah, Zaiton and Latifah Omar. Their combination of acting expertise, beauty and renown helped to launch him on the path to success. He, in turn, introduced and encouraged actors like Jins Shamsudin, and actresses such as Nor Azizah, Sharifah Hanim, and others.

Leading theatre artistes were Haron Omar and Yusof Banjar. Haron Omar came from Medan and ran the theatre troupe Chahaya Medan. It toured Jakarta and several other places in Indonesia, and, before the 1939-1945 war, nearly all the towns



P. Ramlee and Sarimah on the set at the Malay Film Productions Studio at Jalan Ampas, Singapore in 1960



A.R. Tompel and Siti Tanjong Perak

in Malaya. In 1951 he contracted with MFP for five years. His films with P. Ramlee were *Anjoran Nasib*, *Miskin* and *Antara Senyum dan Tangis*. Yusof Banjar was born in Balik Papan, Borneo, and showed versatility by triumphing on the stage in comedies and dramas before transferring to the cinema. He was with P. Ramlee in *Bakti*, *Rachun Dunia*, *Takdir Illahi* and *Nilam*. The supporting actors in the early days of P. Ramlee's Malay films contributed much to his eventual success. Recruited from the theatre (*bangsarwan*) also, and preserving its technique, including the manner of speech, were Aman Belon, Ahmad C.B., Siti Tanjong Perak, A.R. Tompel, S. Kadarisman, Jaafar Wiryo, Daeng Idris, Mustarjo, Malek Sutan Muda, D. Harris, and artistes such as Sharif Medan, Nordin Ahmad and M. Zain.

Apart from Salleh Kamil and S. Kadarisman, there were only two supporting actors capable of playing villains in films directed by P. Ramlee. They were A. Rahim and Omar Suwita. A. Rahim was introduced to films by L. Krishnan. He had an important role in *Juwita* as a young man with dishonourable intentions towards his friend's lover, and was known as the "Zachary Scott" of Malaya. P. Ramlee also utilised his talents as fencing coach for *Pancha Delima* and as dubbing director for *Antara Dua Darjat*.

Omar Suwita was renowned for his choleric temperament. One evening, his wife remembered, he suddenly woke up, sat on a chair staring into space as if in deep thought, and then shot up muttering angrily to himself, his face livid with rage. He afterwards explained to his terrified wife that next day he would be performing a violent scene in P. Ramlee's movie *Pancha Delima*. He enjoyed playing evil characters and would closely observe Hollywood stars to learn how they so cunningly portrayed wickedness. He noted that as well as expressing anger through facial expression, they could also use subtle body lan-

guage such as eye movements, twitching mouth and ears, and altering the pitch of their voice.

P. Ramlee the Director

A director is the most vital person in the cinema world. He needs to be proficient in every area of film-making, must have deep knowledge of art and drama, understand music, recording, singing and the quality of sound; must appreciate painting and be a discriminating art lover. He also needs to be knowledgeable in photography, and gifted with spatial awareness, as well as being skilled at utilising all the lenses of the movie camera. P. Ramlee quickly mastered the secrets of film developing and editing, lighting, and every other aspect of the process, besides already being a very skilful musician and composer.

The first film he directed was *Penarik Becha* (1955). He was only the second person at MFP to have been promoted to director. (Haji Mahadi was the first with *Permata di Perlimbahannya*). By the time he became a director he had gained vast experience in the field, having been assistant director, musical director and composer of incidental music and songs in earlier movies. Run Run Shaw told him: "I expect complete success Remember that this is your first try, so don't be too hasty, but don't be too slow. I also want quality."

A film that aimed at popularity needed popular songs. For *Penarik Becha* P. Ramlee composed such items as "Inang Baru", "Azizah", "Engkau Laksana Bulan" and "Ombak Berdesir", the first of these featuring a new dance. The film also demonstrated his modernity and his sympathy with the less fortunate in society. The message was that a humble trishaw puller had the same emotions and hopes as anyone else. The film represented a pioneer effort to inject a Malay flavour into films and was voted "Best Film" of 1955.

Before *Penarek Becha*, all the twenty-four films in which P. Ramlee appeared were the work of Indian directors who naturally made use of their own traditions and ideas. Thus when P. Ramlee won the opportunity to direct he aimed at interpreting the outlook of the Malay peoples as individuals, family members and communities. In his films he reflected the wishes nurtured by Malays, their relationship with Allah, and the effect of religious and cultural influences such as religious belief, tradition and points of view.

Malay Culture and Religion

We have already discussed P. Ramlee's admiration for the work of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa and his film *Rashomon* (1951). The latter's influence is most notable in the techniques P. Ramlee used for *Semerah Padi*, where the camera angles and the focus of the lenses are subtly employed to heighten dramatic effect. The main theme of *Semerah Padi* is based on Malay culture. The film shows villagers working on the padi fields in a spirit of sharing and co-operation. Among the most highly prized characteristics of Malay culture are refinement and courtesy. Examples are to be seen when the heroine crosses in front of her mother and father (the village head) and walks decorously with her head bowed low. In another traditional touch, betel leaves which would normally be served to guests form part of the engagement gifts received by the heroine and her betrothed.

Another strength of *Semerah Padi* lies in its representation of Islamic influences and the emphasis that Malay culture has its roots in the teachings of Islam. A wayward couple are sentenced to the impaling stake as a punishment for having carnal relations outside marriage, while another couple receive a hundred lashes of the whip and are obliged to marry. In *Semerah Padi* P. Ramlee illustrates the sense of justice that prevails in Is-

lam. This inspires the speech of the village head man when he says: "We are Muslims and therefore we must adhere to the laws of the religion ... and if anyone at all should disobey these laws, it falls to me as village head to punish you in accordance with them."

We again find the power of Allah in *Sumpah Orang Minyak*, where the ugly Si Bongkok asks God what his sins are that he should have been deformed. If, however, in this material world Si Bongkok is unable to experience the joys of life, Allah the most gracious has the power to transport him to another, spiritual world, where he can at last know the pleasures of existence. As P. Ramlee remarked in his magazine *Gelombang Film*: "Making a religious film is not as easy as making purely fictional films which can be augmented or trimmed at the director's behest, since the former have strong connections with human spirituality, especially for the adherents of that particular religion It is likely that making religious films in Hollywood is not as difficult as making films inspired by Islamic stories. Since Islamic laws carry such severe penalties where issues of belief are concerned, we are regularly urged to guard against deification and ridiculing the tenets upon which the faith of the Islamic Ummah is founded. For this reason the production of a religious film should be treated with the utmost care and restraint."

P. Ramlee and Social Problems

The feudal system within the Malay community is treated in *Ibu Mertua-ku* and *Antara Dua Darjat*. The lifestyle of the Malay elite in these two films as exemplified by royalty and the professional classes is symbolised by their ownership of suits and ties, pyjamas, pipes, guns and rifles, and the presence of pianos in their homes. In *Antara Dua Darjat* P. Ramlee cleverly balances this against other Malays who are distinguished by

their *sepak raga* matches and orchestras which perform *keroncong* songs.

Many of P. Ramlee's films touch on the social disparity resulting from differences in status, wealth and family background which have the effect of separating human beings from one another. His aim was to show the difficulty of bridging relations between classes, even when a marriage has taken place (*Ibu Mertua-ku*), or in the case of everlasting love (*Antara Dua Darjat*). More often than not, love and marriage represent the point at which the harshest of disputes between classes and races begin (*Gerimis*).

Another type of P. Ramlee social drama is shown by *Dr. Rushdi*, which dramatises the suffering of a man who is the victim of his wife's inability to understand his problems, a situation facing many husbands at the time. *Jangan Tinggal Daku* touched on problems of criminality and was the first time P. Ramlee blended the depiction of crime with romantic drama. *Gelora*, a striking tragedy, studied the disastrous effects of social incompatibility and the problems of marriage and divorce.

Fantasy and Comedy According to P. Ramlee

Pancha Delima (1957) is an experiment in fantasy which introduced the young Jins Shamsudin (now Dato') to admiring audiences. This blend of *Cinderella*, *The Thief of Baghdad* and snatches of *Hamlet* features a dashing hero and his search for the magic necklace which will rescue him from a spell. P. Ramlee's directing was skilful, and his music, a critic remarked, showed him at his best.

Comedy came as easily as fantasy to P. Ramlee. An article he wrote for *Gelanggang Filem* contains the following remark: "We have watched funny movies both American and British. Despite being based on existing stories, various additions have

been made in such a way that we perceive these films as something illogical or even impossible, yet their very illogicality and impossibility amuse us. By contrast, it's not all that difficult to make a dramatic or historical film. Any difficulty at all lies in preparing the props. Comedy is much more challenging. Apart from the acting and script which should provoke laughter, so, too, should the props. The costumes in a comic film should also inspire amusement"

Why was P. Ramlee interested in directing and acting in comedies? "Even though *Antara Dua Darjat* fulfilled my aim to present a film that served as a mirror to its viewers," he explained, "I still believe that entertainment is the best way of pointing a moral or teaching a lesson. That being so, a film in comic form must be the better medium."

In his comedies, as well as in his dramas, P. Ramlee was singer, composer, musical director and arranger, and comedian. His sense of humour was replete with meaning, metaphor and allusion. So, for example, *Musang Berjanggut* reminds us that we should not let ourselves be influenced by apparently superior people who, if the truth were known, are in their private lives incapable of acting as role models. *Nujum Pa' Belalang* teaches us to live honestly, since the honest are blessed by Allah. In this film P. Ramlee ridicules those who are too lazy to exert themselves. Pa' Belalang is depicted as a man wholly content with his idle life. The scene in which he readily swallows nauseous "coffee" made from charcoal powder illustrates his complacent inertia.

P. Ramlee was no respecter of the aristocracy when they failed to live up to their noble ideals. *Musang Berjanggut* likens the sultan to a horse, the Prime Minister to a statue, and the Marriage Officiator to a fox. His caustic view of society is also to be seen in *Nasib Si Labu Labi*, a tilt at the rich, where the lecherous old widower overcomes his stinginess to fit himself

out with unsuitably youthful clothes and a juvenile haircut so that he may woo the beautiful girl at whom he has set his sights.

As it to show his impartiality, P. Ramlee also condemns the negative aspects of the poor. In *Bujang Lapok* he paints a devastating picture of the heroine's foster father, an alcoholic gambler and marijuana addict, who has no qualms about peddling the sexual favours of his adopted daughter in order to satisfy his gambling habit.

On the other hand, P. Ramlee acknowledges the charitable nature of the rich. One thinks of Abdul Wahub in *Tiga Abdul*, and of Ali Baba in *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok*, who contributed generous sums to the impoverished. It's worth noting, too, that Pa' Belalang does not forget the poor after he has himself attained riches.

As P. Ramlee himself once remarked: "It is more difficult to direct a comedy than a drama. Only the talented and skilful can successfully direct comedies. Even Charlie Chaplin has admitted to this difficulty. We may be able to make someone cry for three hours straight off, but it is rare to find someone who can make you laugh for the same length of time".

Although P. Ramlee's comedies may have contained elements of fantasy and dream, he always emphasised the importance of an easily understandable storyline and acting of a high quality. In *Labu dan Labi*, for example, he showed his skill at enlivening the story with scenes designed to captivate audiences of all races and ages. Among such episodes are the one where Tarzan, "the king of the jungle", is greedy for local spicy dishes. He is also shown typing a letter asking his employer for a rise in wages. A cowboy scene features a signboard giving a "Wanted" list of fugitives from justice.

Even after he began working with MFP, P. Ramlee never gave up his aim to satisfy the needs of Malay audiences. The

horror movie *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* was accompanied by many comedies like *Do Re Mi* and *Sabarudin Tukang Kasut*. There were dramas such as *Sesudah Suboh* and *Gerimis*. If *Kanchan Tirana* was set in ancient times, it nonetheless utilised modern techniques in line with the expectations of modern audiences.

The Triumph of P. Ramlee

During his time at the Jalan Ampas studio in Singapore, P. Ramlee had worked in congenial surroundings and was supported by technicians skilled in every area of film-making. At the Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur, he had to operate with crews who were inexperienced and lacked the necessary expertise. There were also shortages of equipment. He sought to overcome these handicaps by choosing themes that promoted unity, such as provided the inspiration of *Sesudah Suboh* and *Gerimis* which portrayed social conditions within a multiracial society.

In his efforts to overcome these deficiencies, P. Ramlee decided to recruit several former theatre actors as additional members of his casts. The experiment succeeded and encouraged him to employ others who had learned their craft on the stage. As a result he was brilliantly rewarded by artistes such as Mahmud June (later Dato') and A.R. Tompel, as well as by such famous names as Sarimah, Latifah Omar, Kasma Booty, Siput Sarawak, Jins Shamsudin and Yusof Latiff who had all acted in Malay Film Productions films.

Even now, twenty-nine years after his death, the spirit of P. Ramlee lives on in the hearts of Malaysians inspired by his songs and his films. Children who were born after his death in 1973 are familiar with his beguiling humour. No other great entertainment figure has left such an indelible mark on our



P. Ramlee with the two trophies he won at the Asian Film Festival 1957



Ahmad Sarji launching the P. Ramlee commemorative stamps issued by Pos Malaysia on 24th July 1999



Ahmad Sarji (left) displaying the stamps, with Puan Sri Datin Seri Sagiyah Salikin (centre) and Tan Sri Dato Zainol Mahmood, Chairman of Pos Malaysia, on 24th July 1999

country. His films are continually revived in television as the "P. Ramlee Film Festival" and as "P. Ramlee Theater" and other titles. They have lost none of their attractiveness. Digital processing has, moreover, enormously improved their quality. One is astonished, not so much by the pleasant memories of those who grew up with P. Ramlee movies, as by the profound effect they have on Malaysia's young people. Another proof of their classic status is the way in which many phrases from P. Ramlee's films have been accepted as part of our daily lives. These include "*angan*" (dreaming of one's love), "*kapur*" (borrowing something with no intention of returning it), "*cubaan*" (a disturbance while meditating which ought to be deemed a test of our faith), "*ulat bulu*" and "*mambang*". The catch-phrases, dialogue and music of the films, whether comedies, dramas, musical or historical epics, are on the lips of all children old enough to understand and imitate him.

In the 1950s, the young copied P. Ramlee's hairstyle, his moustache and his shirts. Fans rushed for his autographs. This Malaysian co-author managed to obtain an autograph from P. Ramlee in 1950 at the Tong Yoon Hotel in Tapah, when he inscribed: "Love yourself—the world will love you." The Malaysian co-author was given the honour by Pos Malaysia Berhad to launch the First Day cover and commemorative stamps in honour of this artistic genius in 1999.

We can echo the words of his famous song, "Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti" ("Where will I find another you?"). For P. Ramlee is irreplaceable, a legendary figure whose cultural bequest lives on for ever in the hearts of all who love Malaysia.

THE END

Appendix i

LIST OF P. RAMLEE FILMS VIEWED BY THE AUTHORS OF THIS BOOK

No.	Name of Film	Director	Cast	Date issued
1	CHINTA	B.S. Rajhans	Roomai Noor Siput Sarawak P. Ramlee	31.10.1948
2	NOOR ASMARA	B.S. Rajhans	Roomai Noor Kasma Booty P. Ramlee	13.4.1949
3	NASIB	B.S. Rajhans	Roomai Noor Siput Sarawak P. Ramlee	25.7.1949
4	NILAM	B.S. Rajhans	Roomai Noor Siput Sarawak P. Ramlee	28.9.1949
5	RACHUN DUNIA	B.S. Rajhans	Osman Gumanti Kasma Booty P. Ramlee Siput Sarawak	16.2.1950
6	BAKTI	L. Krishnan	Roomai Noor Kasma Booty Siput Sarawak P. Ramlee	4.4.1950
7	TAKDIR ILLAHI	L. Krishnan	P. Ramlee Neng Yatimah Siti Tanjung Perak	19.9.1950
8	ALOHA	B.S. Rajhans	Mariam Osman Gumanti P. Ramlee Jaafar Wiryo	1950

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9	PENGHIDUPAN	L. Krishnan	P. Ramlee Rokiah Maria Menado	23.5.1951
10	SEJOLI	B.S. Rajhans	P. Ramlee Kasma Booty Rokiah	19.6.1951
11	JUWITA	S. Ramanathan	P. Ramlee Kasma Booty	21.8.1951
12	ANTARA SENYUM DAN TANGIS	L. Krishnan	P. Ramlee Rokiah Musalmah	27.2.1952
13	ANJORAN NASIB	B.S. Rajhans	P. Ramlee Mariam Haron Omar	10.4.1952
14	PATAH HATI	K.M. Basker	P. Ramlee Neng Yatimah Musalmah Mohd Hamid	2.8.1952
15	SEDARAH	S. Ramanathan	P. Ramlee Rosnani A. Rahim Saadiah	30.8.1952
16	MISKIN	K.M. Basker	P. Ramlee Rosnani Musalmah Jamil Sulong	1.12.1952
17	PUTUS HARAPAN	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Rokiah Musalmah	2.3.1953
18	IBU	S. Ramanathan	P. Ramlee Rosnani Neng Yatimah Aini Hayati	13.6.1953
19	HUJAN PANAS	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Siput Sarawak Aini Hayati Haji Mahadi	15.8.1953
20	SIAPA SALAH	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Neng Yatimah Siput Sarawak	7.11.1953
21	PANGGILAN PULAU	S. Ramanathan	P. Ramlee Latifah Omar Normadiah	4.7.1954
22	PERIODOHAN	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Normadiah Nordin Ahmad	24.7.1954
23	MERANA	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Latifah Omar Siti Tanjong Perak	27.11.1954

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24	ABU HASSAN PENCHURI	B.N. Rao	P. Ramlee Mariam Mohd Hamid	2.5.1955
25	PENAREK BECHA	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saadiyah Salleh Kamil	25.10.1955
26	HANG TUAH	Phani Majumdar	P. Ramlee Zaiton Saadiyah Ahmad Mahmud	28.1.1956
27	SEMERAH PADI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saadiyah Salleh Kamil Nordin Ahmad	14.7.1956
28	ANAK-KU SAZALI	Phani Majumdar	P. Ramlee Zaiton Nordin Ahmad Rosnani Tony Castello	27.10.195
29	PANCHA DELIMA	P. Ramlee	Jins Shamsudin Hashimah Yon Udo Omar Aini Hayati	7.7.1957
30	BUJANG LAPOK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Aziz Sattar S. Shamsuddin Normadiyah Zaiton Dayang Sofia	30.11.1957
31	SUMPAH ORANG MINYAK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Salleh Kamil Seri Dewi Daeng Idris	20.4.1958
32	SERGEANT HASSAN	Lamberto V. Avellana	P. Ramlee Saadiyah Salleh Kamil Jins Shamsudin	26.8.1958
33	PENDEKAR BUJANG LAPOK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Aziz Sattar S. Shamsuddin Roseyatimah Mustarjo	23.1.1959
34	MUSANG BERJANGGUT	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saadiyah Udo Omar Momo	1.8.1959
35	NUJUM PA' BELALANG	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Hashimah Yon Ahmad Nesfu Bat A. Latiff Aziz Sattar S. Shamsuddin	26.12.1959

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36	ANTARA DUA DARJAT	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saadiah Ahmad Nesfu Kuswadinata S. Shamsuddin	28.5.1960
37	ALI BABA BUJANG LAPOK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee S. Shamsuddin Aziz Sattar Normadiah Sarimah Ibrahim Pendek Saamah	31.1.196
38	SENIMAN BUJANG LAPOK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saloma Aziz Sattar S. Shamsuddin	6.7.1961
39	IBU MERTUA-KU	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Zaiton Sarimah Ahmad Mahmud	7.3.1962
40	LABU DAN LABI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee M. Zain Mariani Sarimah Saloma Aziz Sattar	26.4.1963
41	NASIB SI LABU LABI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee M. Zain Murni Sarawak Udo Omar Mariani Aziz Sattar	26.4.1963
42	MADU TIGA	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah Ahmad Nesfu Haji Mahadi	12.2.1964
43	TIGA ABDUL	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah Haji Mahadi S. Kadarisman Dayang Sofia Mariani	22.4.1964
MERDEKA FILM STUDIOS, KUALA LUMPUR				
44	SI TORA HARIMAU JADIAN	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Rosmawati	1964
45	RAGAM P. RAMLEE (DAMAQ)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Kasma Booty Mahmud June	1965
46	MASAM-MASAM MANIS	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sharifah Hanim	1965

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47	SABARUDIN TUKANG KASUT	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saloma	1966
48	DO RE MI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saloma Ibrahim Din A.R. Tompel	1966
49	NASIB DO RE MI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Ibrahim Din A.R. Tompel Mahyon Ismail	1966
50	SESUDAH SUBOH	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Veera Wee Ed Osmera	1967
51	KELUARGA 69	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Siput Sarawak A.R. Tompel Khadijah Hashim	1967
52	ANAK BAPAK	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Roseyatimah A.R. Tompel Ibrahim Din	1968
53	GERIMIS	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Chandra Shanmugani A.R. Tompel V.I. Stanley	1968
54	AHMAD ALBAB	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Saloma Karim Latiff Mariani A.R. Tompel	1968
55	KANCHAN TIRANA	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah Jins Shamsudin Idris Hashim	1969
56	ENAM JAHANAM	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Nor Azizah Yusof Latiff	1969
57	DI BELAKANG TABIR	Jins Shamsudin	P. Ramlee Jins Shamsudin Nor Azizah	1969
58	BUKAN SALAH IBU MENGANDUNG	Jins Shamsudin	P. Ramlee Jins Shamsudin Sarimah Ed Osmera Sabariah Ibrahim	1969
59	DR RUSHDI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah Sofia Ibrahim Ismail Mahmud	1970

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60	GELORA	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah	1970
61	PUTUS SUDAH KASEH SAYANG	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Latifah Omar Bob Mustaffa Mariani	1971
62	JANGAN TINGGAL DAKU	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee Sarimah	1971
63	LAKSAMANA DO RE MI	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee A.R. Tompel Ibrahim Din Dayang Sulu	1972

Note 1: The films *Noor Asmara* (2), *Bakti* (6) and *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (44) are not available for viewing.

Note 2: P. Ramlee was a guest artiste in three other films, namely: (i) *Melanchong Ke Tokyo* (1964), produced by Malay Film Productions, directed by Ramon A. Estella; (ii) *Love Parade* (1965), produced by Shaw Productions, Hong Kong; and (iii) *Dajal Suchi*, produced by Merdeka Film Productions, directed by D. Ghosh.

Appendix ii

LIST OF P. RAMLEE SONGS HEARD BY THE AUTHORS OF THIS BOOK

No.	Name of Song	Film/Year	Singer	Composer/Lyricist
1	Chinta	<i>Chinta</i> (1948)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Zubir Said
2	Selamat Berjumpa Lagi	<i>Chinta</i> (1948)	P. Ramlee & D. Harris	Zubir Said
3	Mari Pancing Ikan	<i>Chinta</i> (1948)	P. Ramlee	Zubir Said
4	Gelora Asmara	<i>Chinta</i> (1948)	P. Ramlee & Momo	Zubir Said
5	Kumbang dan Rama-Rama	<i>Chinta</i> (1948)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Zubir Said
6	Nasib	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee, Asiah & Momo	Osman Ahmad
7	Tangkap Ikan	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee & D. Harris	Osman Ahmad
8	Awas-awas Jangan Tertawan	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee, Asiah & Momo	Osman Ahmad
9	Udara Nyaman	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee, Asiah & Momo	Osman Ahmad
10	Oh Bulan	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Osman Ahmad
11	Asmara Bergelora	<i>Nasib</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Osman Ahmad/ S. Sudarmadji
12	Putus Harapan	<i>Nilam</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Osman Ahmad
13	Alam di Tiup Bayu	<i>Nilam</i> (1949)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Osman Ahmad

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14	Sang Rang Bulan	<i>Rachun Dunia</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	Zubir Said
15	Melodi Asmara	<i>Rachun Dunia</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Zubir Said
16	Kolam Mandi	<i>Rachun Dunia</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Zubir Said
17	Hidup Berdua	<i>Bakti</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	Osman Ahmad
18	Merpati Dua Sejoli	<i>Bakti</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Momo	Osman Ahmad
19	Hidup Melarat	<i>Bakti</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	Osman Ahmad
20	Taman Puspawarna	<i>Bakti</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	Osman Ahmad
21	Satay	<i>Bakti</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	Osman Ahmad
22	Oh Manis Ku	<i>Takdir Illahi</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
23	Mari Menari	<i>Takdir Illahi</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
24	Di Renjis-Renjis di Pilis	<i>Takdir Illahi</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
25	Gadis dan Teruna	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	
26	Berhati Lara	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	
27	Penawar Hati	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
28	Tasek Madu	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
29	Dayung Sampan	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
30	Hati Gelisah	<i>Aloha</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee	
31	Tak Guna	<i>Pembalasan</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
32	Juwitaku Sayang	<i>Pembalasan</i> (1950)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
33	Dewi Puspitaku	<i>Sejoli</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
34	Harapan Jiwa	<i>Sejoli</i> (1951)		Yusof B./ P. Ramlee
35	Sejoli	<i>Sejoli</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	Junet Rahmat/ S. Sudarmadji
36	Bunga Mekar	<i>Sejoli</i> (1951)		Junet Rahmat/ P. Ramlee
37	Semarak Hati	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
38	Duka Berganti Suka	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)		P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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39	Rindu Hatku Tidak Terkira (Ponggok Rindukan Bulan)	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
40	Juwita	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
41	Raga Musnah	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	Yusof B.
42	Merayu Hati	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
43	Sekuntum Mawar	<i>Juwita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
44	Budi di Bawa Mati (Berhati-hati)	<i>Derita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
45	Hore-Hore	<i>Derita</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
46	Kachang Goreng	<i>Rayuan Sukma</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	Yusof B.
47	Bayangan Wajahmu	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	
48	Asmara Murni	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
49	Memikat Hati	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
50	Mabuk Kepayang	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
51	Di Pulau	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
52	Mutiara Permai	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
53	Kita Berdayung	<i>Pulau Mutiara</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
54	Penghidupan Baru	<i>Penghidupan</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Rubiah	
55	Coraknya Dunia	<i>Bapa Saya</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
56	Debaran Jiwa	<i>Bapa Saya</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	Osman Ahmad
57	Bubur Sagu	<i>Bapa Saya</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	
58	Tinggal Impian	<i>Bapa Saya</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Momo	
59	Kerana Budi	<i>Bapa Saya</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	
60	Dia dan Aku	<i>Berdosa</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	
61	Irama Lagu	<i>Berdosa</i> (1951)	P. Ramlee	
62	Nyanyian Asmara (Gadis Pujaanku)	<i>Anjoran Nasib</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	S. Sudarmadji

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63	Gelora Jiwa	<i>Anjoran Nasib</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
64	Berdendang Ria	<i>Anjoran Nasib</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee, Lena & Momo	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
65	Nasib Si Miskin	<i>Antara Senyum dan Tangis</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
66	Timang Timang Anak	<i>Antara Senyum dan Tangis</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
67	Bertemasya	<i>Antara Senyum dan Tangis</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Momo	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
68	Merayu Asmara	<i>Antara Senyum dan Tangis</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	Yusof B./ S. Sudarmadji
69	Impian Kalbu	<i>Miskin</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	Yusof B.
70	Dunia Hanya Pinjaman	<i>Miskin</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
71	Alam Maya	<i>Miskin</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
72	Nasib Malang	<i>Miskin</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	
73	Kejamnya Manusia	<i>Miskin</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	
74	Tak Sabar Menanti	<i>Patah Hati</i> (1952)	Momo	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
75	Kau Turun Dari Kayangan	<i>Patah Hati</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
76	Rindu Asmara	<i>Patah Hati</i> (1952)		Yusof B./
77	Keluhan Ku			P. Ramlee
78	Saling Kasih	<i>Sedarah</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee/ R. Azmi & Lena	
79	Mesra Ibu	<i>Sedarah</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
80	Kelasi	<i>Sedarah</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
81	Dari Hati Ke Hati	<i>Sedarah</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
82	Nasi Goreng	<i>Chemburu</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
83	Chemburu	<i>Chemburu</i> (1952)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
84	Nasibnya Manusia	<i>Putus Harapan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
85	Sampah Hanyut Terapung	<i>Putus Harapan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
86	Tidur-lah Permaisuri	<i>Putus Harapan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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87	Saya Suka Berkawan/ Gelora Chinta	<i>Putus Harapan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee & Momo	Yusof B.
88	Aduhai Sayang	<i>Hujan Panas</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
89	Mari Dengar Ini Cerita	<i>Hujan Panas</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
90	Ingin Tahu	<i>Hujan Panas</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
91	Merak Kayangan	<i>Hujan Panas</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
92	Derita	<i>Hujan Panas</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	
93	Tidurku di Rumput Yang Basah	<i>Siapa Salah</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
94	Sunyi dan Senyap	<i>Siapa Salah</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
95	Siksa	<i>Siapa Salah</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	
96	Kumbang Dengan Bunga	<i>Siapa Salah</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
97	Manusia Miskin Kaya	<i>Siapa Salah</i> (1953)	Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
98	Mengapa Riang Ria	<i>Perjodohan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad
99	Hujan di Tengah Hari	<i>Perjodohan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad
100	Sungguh Malangnya Nasibku	<i>Perjodohan</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad
101	Di Telan Pahit Di Buang Sayang		Normadiah	P. Ramlee
102	Hamidah	<i>Ibu</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
103	Ibu	<i>Ibu</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee	Ahmad Jaafar/ S. Sudarmadji
104	Tak Puan Mata Memandang	<i>Budi Mulia</i> (1953)	P. Ramlee/ Sutinah	Ahmad Jaafar
105	Simpulan Kasih	<i>Panggilan Pulau</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	
106	Bulan dan Juga Angin	<i>Panggilan Pulau</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
107	Dengarlah Kemal Hati	<i>Panggilan Pulau</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
108	Mengapa Pilu Saja	<i>Panggilan Pulau</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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109	Masa Yang Bahagia	<i>Merana</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	
110	Bila Tiba Masa	<i>Merana</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee/ Normadiah	
111	Kata Dari Kalbu	<i>Merana</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
112	Isten Yang di Rindu	<i>Merana</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee	
113	Asmara Datang Bersama Sang Bulan	<i>Arjuna</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee & Lena	
114	Sikit Kasi Banyak Minta	<i>Arjuna</i> (1954)	P. Ramlee & Asiah	
115	Patah Tumbuh Hilang Berganti	<i>Empat Isteri</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Hassan Sahab
116	Terbuku di Kalbu	<i>Kipas Hikmat</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ S. Kadarisman
117	Alam	<i>Kipas Hikmat</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	P. Ramlee
118	Bersama	<i>Kipas Hikmat</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	Osman Ahmad
119	Chinta Abadi	<i>Abu Hassan Penchuri</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Sabariah Haron	
120	Dengarlah Sang Ombak Berdesir	<i>Penarik Becha</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee & Momo	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
121	Azizah	<i>Penarik Becha</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
122	Engkau Laksana Bulan	<i>Penarik Becha</i> (1955)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
123	Berkorban Apa Saja	<i>Hang Tuah</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
124	Joget Tari Lenggang	<i>Hang Tuah</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
125	Melaka	<i>Hang Tuah</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
126	Makan Sireh di Semerah Padi	<i>Semerah Padi</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
127	Semerah Padi	<i>Semerah Padi</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
128	Anak-ku Sazali	<i>Anak-ku Sazali</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
129	Tiada Kata Secantik Bahasa	<i>Anak-ku Sazali</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
130	Itulah Sayang	<i>Anak-ku Sazali</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	

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131	Joget Si Pinang Muda	<i>Anak-ku Sazali</i> (1956)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
132	Telaga Hati	<i>Pancha Delima</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
133	Bahtera Karam	<i>Pancha Delima</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	
134	Tak Seindah Bunga	<i>Pancha Delima</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee
135	Dari Masa Hingga Masa	<i>Pancha Delima</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
136	Manusia	<i>Bujang Lapok</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
137	Nak Dara Rindu	<i>Bujang Lapok</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
138	Resam Dunia (Resam Rindu)	<i>Bujang Lapok</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee & Normadiah	
139	Aneka Ragam	<i>Belantara</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad/ S. Sudarmadji
140	Kwek Mambo	<i>Belantara</i> (1957)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad/ S. Sudarmadji
141	Tunggu Sekejap	<i>Sergeant Hassan</i> (1958)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
142	Tudung Periok	<i>Sumpah Orang Minyak</i> (1958)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	H.M. Rohaizad
143	Seri Bunian	<i>Sumpah Orang Minyak</i> (1958)	P. Ramlee	S. Sudarmadji
144	Bila Mama Pakai Celana	<i>Saudagar Minyak Urat</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
145	Maafkan Kami	<i>Pendekar Bujang Lapok</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee & S. Sudarmadji
146	Malam Bulan di Pagar Bintang	<i>Pendekar Bujang Lapok</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
147	Pok-Pok Bujang Lapok	<i>Pendekar Bujang Lapok</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
148	Betapa Riangnya	<i>Puteri Gunung Ledang</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	
149	Inikah Suratn Hidup	<i>Puteri Gunung Ledang</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	
150	Puteri Bersiram	<i>Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	Osman Ahmad/ S. Sudarmadji

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151	Rintihan di Jiwa-ku	<i>Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	Osman Ahmad/ S. Sudarmadji
152	Gunung Payong	<i>Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
153	Jangan Adek Angan-Angan	<i>Musang Berjanggut</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Rahmah Rahmat	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
154	Joget Pura Chendana	<i>Musang Berjanggut</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
155	Ketipang Payung	<i>Nujum Pa' Belalang</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
156	Kalau Kacha Menjadi Intan	<i>Nujum Pa' Belalang</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee & Hashimah Yon	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
157	Nujum Pa' Belalang	<i>Nujum Pa' Belalang</i> (1959)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
158	Selamat Panjang Umur	<i>Antara Dua Darjat</i> (1960)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
159	Alunan Biola	<i>Antara Dua Darjat</i> (1960)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
160	Getaran Jiwa	<i>Antara Dua Darjat</i> (1960)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
161	Apek dan Marjina	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee & Normadiyah	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
162	Beginilah Nasib	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
163	Hoi-Hoi Ya-Hoi	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
164	Ya Habibi Ali Baba	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
165	Mencece Bujang Lapok	<i>Seniman Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee, S. Shamsuddin & Aziz Sattar	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
166	Gelora	<i>Seniman Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
167	Senandung Kaseh	<i>Seniman Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
168	Jangan Tinggal Daku	<i>Ibu Mertua-ku</i> (1962)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
169	Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti	<i>Ibu Mertua-ku</i> (1962)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
170	Jeritan Batin-ku	<i>Ibu Mertua-ku</i> (1962)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
171	Yang Mana Satu Idaman Kalbu	<i>Labu dan Labi</i> (1962)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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172	Barang Yang Lepas Jangan DiKenang	<i>Nasib Si Labu Labi (1963)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
173	Aci-Aci Buka Pintu	<i>Nasib Si Labu Labi (1963)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
174	Madu Tiga	<i>Madu Tiga</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
175	Dendang Perantau		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
176	Lenggang Kangkong		Saloma	P. Ramlee
177	Apabila Kau Tersenyum		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
178	Gambus Jodoh	<i>Madu Tiga (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
179	Pukul Tiga Pagi	<i>Madu Tiga (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/
180	Bunyi Gitar	<i>Tiga Abdul (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
181	Sedangkan Lidah Lagi Tergigit	<i>Tiga Abdul (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
182	Tolong Kami	<i>Tiga Abdul (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
183	Jikalau Ku Tahu	<i>Si Tora Harimau Jadian (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
184	Mengapa Tak Berkawan	<i>Si Tora Harimau Jadian (1964)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee
185	Ku Rindu Padamu	<i>Masam-Masam Manis (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
186	Saat Yang Bahagia	<i>Masam-Masam Manis (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
187	Dalam Air Terbayang Wajah	<i>Masam-Masam Manis (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
188	Ai Ai Twist	<i>Masam-Masam Manis (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
189	Hancur Badan Kandung Tanah	<i>Ragam P. Ramlee (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
190	Aduh Sayang	<i>Ragam P. Ramlee (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
191	Di Pinggiran	<i>Ragam P. Ramlee (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
192	Joget Malaysia	<i>Ragam P. Ramlee (1965)</i>	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
193	Rantai Terlepas	<i>Do Re Mi (1966)</i>	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal

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194	Do Re Mi	<i>Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee, A.R. Tompel & Ibrahim Din	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
195	Berpedati		P. Ramlee	
196	Hoi-Hoi Ya-Hoi	<i>Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee & Pancha Sitara	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
197	Obat	<i>Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee & Pancha Sitara	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
198	Bintang Hati	<i>Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	Saloma	P. Ramlee
199	Sua Sue Kemuning	<i>Nasib Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee, A.R. Tompel & Ibrahim Din	
200	Ilham Tiba	<i>Nasib Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramee & Saloma	Ahmad Nawab/ A.R. Tompel
201	Taman Firdausi	<i>Nasib Do Re Mi</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	Ahmad Nawab/ A.R. Tompel
202	Gelang Suasa	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
203	Sabar	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
204	Seri Bulan	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
205	Bahagia	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
206	Sabarudin Tukang Kasut	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1966)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramee/ Mas Merduati
207	Entah di Mana	<i>Keluarga 69</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ A.R. Tompel
208	Semenjak Mata Bertentang	<i>Keluarga 69</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ A.R. Tompel
209	Mengapa Derita	<i>Keluarga 69</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ A.R. Tompel
210	Keluarga 69	<i>Keluarga 69</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
211	Qadzaan Tuhan	<i>Sesudah Subuh</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
212	Sepanjang Rwayat-ku	<i>Sesudah Suboh</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
213	Sesudah Suboh	<i>Sesudah Suboh</i> (1967)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee

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214	Ahmad Albab	<i>Ahmad Albab</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
215	Suna	<i>Ahmad Albab</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
216	Mastura	<i>Ahmad Albab</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee
217	Intan Menjadi Kaca	<i>Ahmad Albab</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
218	Pujaanku Pujaanmu	<i>Gerimis</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee
219	Teruskan-lah	<i>Gerimis</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
220	Keroncong Kuala Lumpur	<i>Anak Bapak</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
221	Terbang Burung Terbang	<i>Anak Bapak</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ A.R. Tompel
222	Jodoh Ta' Ke Mana	<i>Anak Bapak</i> (1968)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee
223	Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti	<i>Enam Jahanam</i> (1969)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
224	Rela Hamba Rela	<i>Enam Jahanam</i> (1969)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
225	Selamat Pengantin Baru	<i>Kanchan Tirana</i> (1969)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
226	Di Renjis Baru	<i>Kanchan Tirana</i> (1969)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
227	Assalamualaikum	<i>Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang</i> (1971)	P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
228	Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang	<i>Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang</i> (1971)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
229	Bujang Merempat	<i>Laksamana Do Re Mi</i> (1972)	P. Ramlee, A.R. Tompel & Ibrahim Din	P. Ramlee/ A.R. Tompel
230	Tiga Sahabat	<i>Laksamana Do Re Mi</i> (1972)	P. Ramlee, A.R. Tompel & Ibrahim Din	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
231	Air Mata di Kuala Lumpur		Saloma	P. Ramlee
232	Rindu Hati Ku Rindu		P. Ramlee	
233	Ku Jejak Bekas Kaki Mu		P. Ramlee	
234	Aku Debuk		Aziz Jaafar	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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235	Aku Menangis		Pancha Sitara	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
236	Aku Tak Berdaya	<i>Dajal Suchi</i> (1974)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
237	Aia Payung	<i>Pendekar 4</i>	Saloma & Norli Ismail	P. Ramlee/ S. Kadarisman
238	Alhamdulillah	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	Hamid & Normadiyah	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
239	Ali Baba Rock	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i> (1961)	P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
240	Apa Guna Berjanji	<i>Masam-Masam Manis</i> (1965)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
241	Apabila Kau Tersenyum		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad
242	Awan Mendung Telah Tiba	<i>Sabarudin Tukang Kasut</i> (1965)	Saloma	P. Ramlee
243	Baidah		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
244	Bawah Rumpun Bambu		Mimi Loma	P. Ramlee/ Salleh Ghani
245	Berhutang Jiwa di Bayar Jiwa	<i>Dr. Rushdi</i> (1966)	Saloma	P. Ramlee
246	Bila		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
247	Bila Larut Malam	<i>Labu dan Labi</i> (1962)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
248	Bintang Hati	<i>Dr. Rushdi</i> (1966)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Saloma
249	Bintang Sore		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
250	Bulan Jatuh Ke Riba		Mimi Loma	P. Ramlee/ Salleh Ghani
251	Mengapa Abang Merajuk		Mimi Loma	P. Ramlee/ Salleh Ghani
252	Kisah Mahjung		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee
253	Bulan Mengambang		P. Ramlee	Ahmad C.B.
254	Bumiku Ini		Saloma	P. Ramlee/Sutan Sharil Lembang
255	Bunga Melor		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
256	Cik Cik Boom	<i>Saudagar Minyak Urat</i> (1959)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
257	Dendang Perantau		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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260	Di Mana Suara Burung Kenari		P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
261	Di Waktu Pagi	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok (1961)</i>	Normadiyah, dll.	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
262	Gara Asmara		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ H.M. Rohaizad
263	Gerimis		Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Saloma
264	Gitar Berbunyi	<i>Do Re Mi (1966)</i>	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
265	Hanya Angan-Angan		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
266	Hanya Dikau		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji & Jamil Sulong
267	Harapan Bonda	<i>Dajal Suchi (1974)</i>	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ Ainol Jamal
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278	Jikalau Abang Merindu	<i>Saudagar Minyak Urat (1959)</i>	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
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281	Kasihnya Ibu	<i>Pancha Delima</i> (1957)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
282	Kembara	<i>Kanchan Tirana</i> (1969)	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ P. Ramlee
283	Kenek-Kenek Udang	<i>Gergasi</i>	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Ahmad Sahab
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313	Rembang Petang		Suhaily Shamsuddin	P. Ramlee/ Kamaruzzaman
314	Surat Cinta		Suhaily Shamsuddin	P. Ramlee/ Kamaruzzaman
315	Rukun Islam		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Jamil Sulong
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320	Selamat Berbahagia Wahai Kekasih		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ A. Mustaffa
321	Selamat Han Raya		Ahmad Jais	
322	Selamat Pengantin Baru	<i>Madu Tiga (1964)</i>	Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
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324	Senjakala		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ Yusnor Ef
325	Dewi Ilhamku		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
326	Si Burung Pungguk		P. Ramlee & Saloma	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji

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329	Seribu Satu Malam		P. Ramlee	P. Ramlee/ S. Sudarmadji
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