

FEATURES › NEWS

Lurking Woods - Close Up With Director Rizal Halim



Rizal Halim speaks on his major breakthrough in directing 'Lurking Woods.' -- Pic: Zack Zaini
By **Salbiah Said**

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 1 (Bernama) -- They say, don't judge a book by its cover. In the case of Malaysian filmmaker Rizal Halim, don't take him lightly as the former karate champ can break several thick boards with his fist or ceiling panels of a room with a kick.

Rizal, who has ditched his long hair for a clean-cut image said in an exclusive interview with BERNAMA Lifestyle and Youth, "Not many people know me. I guess, there was hardly any gossip about me."



Rizal in action during the filming of 'Lurking Woods' in Perth. - Courtesy Rodman Pictures

His resume speaks volumes of the man, whose karate prowess has won him roles as both actor and stuntman in 1994 Hollywood movie 'Beyond Rangoon' and 1995 Hong Kong's Jackie Chan Film 'Police Story 2'. He also acted and served as intern in 1998 Hollywood movie 'Anna & The King.'

Today, the low-profiled director, producer and scriptwriter who hails from Batu Gajah, Perak, is making waves Down Under. He is said to be the first Malay to direct 'Lurking Woods', an all-Australian cast suspense thriller co-produced by both Malaysians and Australians in Western Australia.

Rizal, 44, said he must have struck the right note when Penang-born Rod Manikam, the Director of Rodman Pictures Pty Ltd, offered him the hot seat as director of a new movie early March this year.



Group photo of cast and crew of 'Lurking Woods' in Perth. - Courtesy Rodman Pictures

CANNES RECOGNITION

"That was when after he got to know that I was given recognition for my short film 'Still Life' at the Cannes festival in 2014," said Rizal, who was the director of photography for the low-budget film.

Manikam, a friend of 12 years and former chef and actor, flew down from Perth together with his scriptwriter to discuss the deal, which set the path for Rizal's major international breakthrough.

"Everything happened so suddenly. Rezeki Allah (Allah's Providence)," he said. The film cost only RM1,000. "After giving him the link to my work, Rod made an offer for his new project. I

didn't expect that with RM1,000, I could go far," said Rizal, noting that they had both acted in *Hired Killer* (2005), but did not discuss about making movies. "But we kept in touch." "Initially we thought of producing an action flick costing AUD1.5 million (RM4 million) but that would cost a hefty sum, so we decided on a smaller budget movie. We created 'Lurking Woods', which is a slasher movie costing RM1.2 million."

SOURCING FOR FUNDS

Both of them got their act together by looking for funds. Manikam spoke to his dentist, while Rizal spoke to a businessman, who then introduced his partner, a Malaysian Chinese. They also approached their neighbours in Perth.

"To our surprise and Alhamdulillah (All praise to Allah), we managed to get our investors after telling them of our film plans in Perth," Rizal recalled. "A handshake is an agreement for Australians. After securing our funds, we went to work and the filming in Perth took only 9 days from May 10. Desmond Hew, another Malaysian based in Kuala Lumpur, who works in a bank, wrote the script," he noted.

The film is backed by a solid and experienced team of professionals in their fields, with executive producers Jag Pannu of JAG Productions and Ong Teng Boon, both Malaysian businessmen from Ipoh and Taiping respectively who are based in Australia; and Rowan Scott, an Australian based in Australia. Darryl Westrup, Australian actor and personal assistant to Manikam and owner of Auswebtech is co-producer while Rizal and Azman Yeop Jr, both based in Malaysia are associate producers.

PEOPLE BEHIND IT

Lead actors are Daniel Berenger, Hope Devaney, Troy Coward, Dominique Shenton, Kyle James Sargon, Chloe Brown and Michael Rainone.

'Lurking Woods' is about the joyous reunion of six lifelong friends which takes a grisly turn when they are hunted down by a murderous assailant. As tensions mount, they find the bonds of friendship being strained to its breaking point in this nail-biting suspense thriller.

"The beauty of the film, which was shot in a 500-acre estate in Perth, is that you can't predict the killer. It keeps the viewers guessing till the very end," said Rizal.

The estate is sponsored by Mark Ledger, whose nephew is the late actor Heath Ledger, an Australian actor and director. A few months before his death in 2008, Heath had finished filming his performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

"What's unique about the film is the people behind it are Malaysians, reflecting a truly 1Malaysia initiative. Together with our Australian team, we bring this movie to the international level," said Rizal.

WORLDWIDE RELEASE

"The film is expected to be ready for release in Malaysia and Australia in October. We will fly down our cast and crew for exclusive premiere shows in Penang (Oct 13) Ipoh (Oct 16) Kota Kinabalu (Oct 20) and Kuala Lumpur (Oct 23) and later hit Perth, Sydney and Melbourne," said Rizal.

The worldwide release will be decided by the international distributor, possibly this year or 2016, he said. "We are talking to a few distributors, but have yet to decide. At the same time, we are planning to send the movie, which is about 80 minutes long, to various film festivals," he added.

Whilst this project is in post-production, the 'Lurking Woods' teaser is currently being shown online, Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo and Bernama Lifestyle and Youth portal.

Rodman Pictures has produced three feature films and two short films. Both will be featured as major short film festivals in 2015. Currently, its projects are filmed using a state-of-the art 6K 'Red Dragon' camera.

NEXT - AN ACTION FLICK

In late 2014, its movie 'Infected Paradise' was nominated for Best Feature Film Long Form in the inaugural 26th Annual West Australian Screen Awards.

In the spirit of Malaysia Boleh, both Rizal and Manikam are already working on another film, which is expected to roll off after the premiere shows in Australia.

"At the moment, we are looking for a script for the third movie, an action flick, with 70 per cent to be filmed in Perth and the rest in Malaysia. I will direct both films.

"We are proud to create a Malaysian brand overseas. The opportunities are there for us to tap," said Rizal. Rodman Pictures is currently seeking collaboration between Malaysia and Australia and utilising the skills of casting and crew from both nations.

-- BERNAMA