

## **Rod Manikam – The Man Behind ‘Lurking Woods’**

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Rod Manikam

KUALA LUMPUR – The trophy for Best Film at Hollywood’s annual Academy Awards doesn’t go to the winning movie’s director or to its screen stars.

Rather, it’s presented to the producers. What does a producer do, exactly? “Everything... from head to tail. What we do is we start pre-production, get an idea, get the story out, work on the story, work out the budget and get investors,” says Penang-born Rod Manikam, who owns Australian-based Rodman Pictures Pty Ltd.

“He makes sure everything is run smoothly, from food, catering to camera crew, makeup artists, sound, post production and not forgetting the marketing after that,” he told Berita Lifestyle and Youth in an exclusive interview recently.

Manikam, 46, co-produces ‘Lurking Woods’ a 94-minute slasher movie with Australia-based Malaysian businessman Jag Pannu of Jag Productions, Malaysian Ong Teng Boon and Australian, Rowan Scott. The film is directed by actor and former stuntman Rizal Halim, who is said to be the first Malay to be given the role in Australia.

#### PREMIERES IN OCTOBER

Come October, the all- Australian cast and crew suspense thriller film, which was shot in Perth, Western Australia, will hit the cinemas in Malaysia and Australia in October for premieres before being released worldwide.

Manikam, who is a mixed Indian Malaysian, graduated as a graphic designer in 1990 and as a chef shortly after. He comes from a family of musicians – his father Edward is a now retired renowned musician in Malaysia, and his sister Adeline is a professional musician in Zurich, Switzerland.

Manikam himself plays music but his passion is film. After travelling extensively throughout Europe and the UK, he set his sights on Australia where he decided that this was the place to set down his roots and pursue his passion – acting and producing.

“I lived half or three quarters of my life in Malaysia. I was a chef before and that’s how I got to Australia but my passion is acting and producing films. I have done a few extras in a few productions in Malaysia and the US.

“But one day, I said okay. I had enough of cooking. I just want to follow my dream and my passion. That’s how Rodman was born,” recalls Manikam, who moved to Perth in 2007. He is now an Australian citizen.

## HOW IT ALL STARTED

On how ‘Lurking Woods’ got started, Manikam says “As people know, I wanted to make two movies a year in Australia. One day, I went over to Malaysia to meet Rizal Halim.

The plan was to make an action movie, but we ended up with a suspense thriller movie. It was a very interesting story. I thought that I would actually turn the story into reality. That’s how it all started.” Rodman Pictures was inceptioned in April 2013 in Western Australia, with the first movie produced during the same month.

“So basically the company is Australian. But I would love in future to film my movie in both my beloved countries. We’ll see the right time (for it),” adds Manikam.

As an independent film producer, he says his projects are self-financed. “As we grow bigger, we need to get people to work with us. That’s when I got to know a very pleasant Malaysian-born Jag Pannu.”

## NINE-DAY CHALLENGE

After having a chat with him, Pannu says he loved the script. Manikam says that two other executive producers Rowan Scott and Ong Teng Boon also loved the script. They all decided to go on board.

Both Rizal and Azman Yeop Jr are associate producers, while KL-based Desmond Hew is screenwriter and graphic designer of the film.

On the challenges of filming ‘Lurking Woods, he says “We didn’t have much problem. The man upstairs was very kind to us. It was filmed in winter and yet we didn’t have much rain that time.

“But the biggest problem was the time factor. As Rizal had only nine days with us, we had to film this movie within that time. We doubted that we could finish it.

Both my co-producer Darryl Westrup and me planned it correctly. With talented actors and enough planning, we managed to pull it off within nine days,” Manikam recalls.

## FULL OF TWISTS

Manikam says: “I won’t tell you too much about the film. It’s a suspense thriller as you know. I won’t give you a spoiler alert, except that it’s going to be very interesting, full of twists.” ‘Lurking Woods’ is about six friends on a reunion trip to the woods, who find themselves the target of an unknown axe-wielding assailant who puts their lifelong friendship to the test, pushing it to its violent breaking point.

Manikam started his acting career in 1988 and in the following two years, he was an extra in six different movies and then progressed to having small roles in two further movies, which led to his first major supporting role in 2004.

He has produced five films since 2013. The first film was ‘Wild Justice’ in 2013 which was directed by another Malaysian Julian Cheah.

## NOMINATED FOR BEST FEATURE FILM

“‘Wild Justice’ is selling in the US, and just got sold in Thailand. I’ve got a distributor who is pushing it to the world.

“It’s a low budget movie, with no outside support. I did it on my own. But I’m pretty happy with what has happened to it. Hopefully one day it will reach Malaysia,” he says.

In 2014, Manikam produced a horror movie, ‘Infected Paradise’, which was also directed by Cheah. The film was nominated at the 26th Annual West Australian Screen Awards (WASA) for Best Feature Film – Long Form. Jag Pannu’s ‘Twisted Minds’ was also nominated for the award.

“I’m happy that two Malaysian films, including mine, were nominated. We didn’t win, but of the four nominations, two Malaysians were there. Being two new companies nominated for a big event, I think we did pretty well.” Manikam has also tried his hand at directing in two short films – ‘Sofie’ and ‘Man in the Mirror’, that will be screened at short film festivals this year and 2016.

## PASSION TO MAKE IT RIGHT

On whether it was easy to make ‘Lurking Woods’, Manikam says “Nothing is easy but the fire in it. You need passion to make it right. If you have the fire, it would be interesting to do and and make it right.” For Manikam, working with the film community has been nothing but fun. “I have a very good, strong and passionate team. I’m so lucky to have people like this in Rodman Pictures.”

Reaction to ‘Lurking Woods’ teaser, he notes, has been overwhelming. “I didn’t expect such a big response in Malaysia, let alone Australia. Because of that, everybody’s waiting to watch the movie when it is released.” Manikam says his company is looking at producing a second film for this year, with pre-production expected to take off after Lurking Woods’ premiere shows in October.

“It will be entirely filmed in Australia. I am in the process of talking to some executive producers, including Jag Pannu to produce the film, with ‘Retribution’ as its working title.” At the same time, Manikam expects to produce another movie, which will be filmed both in Malaysia and Australia next year.

## AWESOME DUDE

On Rizal as the director, he says: “Rizal is an awesome dude. I’ve known him for 12 years. We both acted in Malaysian production. In Julian Cheah’s ‘Hired Killer’, I was a police officer in the movie, and Rizal was my sidekick.”

“From acquaintance, we became friends. I found out that his work as director is very good. So, when I was planning on my first film project for this year, I asked him to come and work with me in Perth. He said yes.

“You’ll see him in my future production work. He’s a great director. He works along well with people in Perth, and with alot of people, even in Malaysia. If you need a good director, look for Rizal Halim.” Asked to describe the film in one or two words, Manikam says “In Australia, they say bloody awesome; in Malaysia, very nice.”

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