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Giving voice to others

INDRANI Kopal found out about FreedomFilmFest07 via a banner on a website and was immediately intrigued by its human rights angle. FreedomFilmFest, which is organised annually by Komas (Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat, a people's communications centre), gives awards to ideas for movies. Each year, it picks the best three proposals and gives the winners a RM5,000 grant to make the documentaries.

Since Indrani deals with many human rights-related stories in her day-to-day job as a video journalist, she thought that it was right up her alley.

She sent in her application in March, and was shortlisted at the end of April and awarded the grant in May.



Internet journalist Indrani Kopal was inspired to make the documentary "She's my son" after getting to know several transsexuals during an assignment to cover them.

producing something that I've already won an award for. As a result, there's more pressure on me, and I'm taking extraordinary efforts to make it good," she said during our first interview in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, two months ago.

When I caught up with Indrani over the phone this week, she told me that the documentary was with her editor for final touchups.

Komas judge and executive director of Centre for Independent Journalism Gayathry V. said: "One of her strengths was that she could make us visualise what she planned to do with her proposal, and that was her advantage over the others. You can see the message being transformed into a visual – that's very important for a film – and how she plans to convey the message to the audience.

"Also, she was going to use people around the subject to talk about the life of a transsexual which is a little bit different. Her approach was quite good."

Indrani is one of three winners. The other two are Fahmi Reza (his documentary, Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka was highlighted by StarMag on Aug 26) and Ong Boon Keong (StarMag interviewed him last week about his documentary, The Weld Quay George Town Squatters).

"It's a big responsibility. Expectations are so high. And whether you like it or not, you'll have to do it. I'm

She added that making the documentary had been a learning experience. It was gratifying as well.



Indrani Kopal giving Sarika, 23, directions for a scene for her documentary "She's my son".

“I’m happy to be able to share the story of the mother because I didn’t think I could. It’s really the story of the mother (Samsed), and I really hope that the message will reach the audience,” she said.

However, Indrani had to make a few painful choices, such as cutting out a colourful dance sequence which she initially thought would be the highlight of the documentary.



Indra Kopal and Suganya going over production notes during the filming of "She's my son".

It will now be shown at the end of the documentary during the credits.

“Presentation-wise, it would have made the documentary look good but that would have stolen the limelight from the mother,” said Indrani.

“As it is, she speaks in broken Malay, and you really have to listen carefully to truly grasp what she has to say. But more importantly, I didn't want the audience to be distracted from Samsed's message.

“Certain stories can only be told in a simple and direct way. At the end of the day, I learned that the message is more important than the beautifying of the documentary.”

The 20-minute documentary has a very Malaysian feel: the interviews are conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, with the narration in English. In between, viewers will get to see Suganya and Samsed going about their daily lives, speaking to each other in Tamil. There will be Bahasa Malaysia and English subtitles.

A lot of work has obviously gone into She's My Son, but Indrani is still nervous about how the public would react to her documentary.

“Will they think: In six months you produced this?” she said with a nervous laugh. “I really hope that people will appreciate the message (of the documentary) rather than the presentation. But I don't know if this can be sent across. I'm worried, but I have a strong belief in Samsed. I believe that she will captivate the audience.”

- *The three documentaries that won funding from 'FreedomFilmFest07' will be screened from Sept 14-16 at the Central Market Annexe, Kuala Lumpur; Sept 21-23 at The Actors Studio Greenhall, Penang; and Sept 28-30 at the Jotic auditorium, Johor Baru.*

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