

In remembrance: Paul Agusta, Leon Agusta's youngest son, documents his father's legacy in a documentary.



'ALL IS FORGIVEN FOR WE WERE ONCE HAPPY'

WHERE POLITICAL, CULTURAL & PERSONAL MEMORIES COLLIDE

An elegiac documentary on late Indonesian poet and public intellectual Leon Agusta (1938-2015) is a multi-layered film on one of the country's unresolved tragedies and how it affects people personally.

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The Minangkabau ethnic group from West Sumatra is particularly known for the abundance of national public intellectuals it has produced, such as writer Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana and historian Taufik Abdullah, to name a few.

Leon Agusta (Ridwan Ilyas) was one of them. He was born in Maninjau, West Sumatra, on Aug. 5, 1938, and died in Padang, West Sumatra, on Dec. 10, 2015.

He is best known for his poetry but also wrote novels, short stories, essays, stage plays and journalistic pieces during his lifetime. The late poet is known as *penyair biru* (blue poet) due to his melancholic style of writing poetry.

A 90-minute documentary on the relentless writer and political activist titled *Semua Telah Dimaafkan Karena Kita Pernah Bahagia* (All Is Forgiven for We Were Once Happy), co-directed by Katia Engel and Paul Agusta, Leon's youngest son, recently premiered at the 2017 Jogja-NET-PAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF).

The film sheds light on the poet's personal life and ties it to a tragic episode of Indonesia's national history. The film's title is an excerpt from a poetry he wrote in 2010 called *Suasana* (Ambience).

The documentary itself uses archives and footage from the poet's life, interviews with people who knew him best and the artists whose works he influenced, as well as narrations from Paul on his memories of his late father, to create a personal historical tapestry, along with the national and cultural context that wraps around it.

His works highlighted, among others, the human cost of Indonesia's political upheavals. Leon was far too familiar with this since he himself had a hard life navigating Indonesia's difficult and bloody political transitions.

A prominent episode was the central government-sanctioned military crush against the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (PRRI), resulting in a civil war that took place in 1958-1961 in West Sumatra.

The upheavals associated with the PRRI rebel-

lion resulted in the abduction and murder of his family members, which is chronicled in the documentary.

American scholar Audrey Kahin writes in her book, *Rebellion to Integration: West Sumatra and the Indonesian Polity, 1926-1998*, that the uprising originated in the Minangkabau people's discontent of the Sukarno regime's centralized hegemony over politics, the economy and the military. Furthermore, they were also angry about the fact that a huge chunk of economic gains reaped from Minangkabau resources was being channeled to Java Island.

This shows that our national political elite have no problem sacrificing people in civil wars and bloodbaths in order to retain power. The poet, disturbed by this fact, would distill Indonesia's political upheavals into his sorrowful poetry.

Leon, who joined the now-defunct Indonesian Socialist Party, also had to endure imprisonments during both the Sukarno and Soeharto eras because he was deemed too right by Sukarno and too leftist for Soeharto's tastes.

The pain associated with being a political prisoner was captured in his 1967 poem *Ketika Langit dan Bumi Tak Lagi Terbayangkan* (When the Sky and Earth Can No Longer Be Imagined) and narrated in the documentary: *Breathing here, still faintly sensing solitude/Even death avoids me. There is no love to revive me/Only the feeling of loss sweeps over me. Continuously/Lost in exile; cast away.*

The poet himself said he was anxious and concerned about how Indonesia's politics, after going through certain periods of calm, would enter into yet another upheaval.

This cycle, which looks like a dragon who keeps chasing its own tail, is also captured in his 1979 poem *Di Penyeberangan* (At the Crossing): *The convoy of wanderers were exhausted/They fell into a long, deep sleep When they awoke, hundreds of years had passed/They had forgotten the plan to cross over/They continued their journey with a map of their own making/back toward the place they had left behind.*

The poems narrated in the documenta-

ry are accompanied by minimalist illustrations or with no accompaniments at all, allowing viewers to listen to the words with the backdrop of a black screen. Props to cinematographer Faozan Rizal, who has made it so that the minimalist visuals enhance the poetry without taking away from it by providing too many details.

The soundtrack for the film consists of haunting high-pitched sounds made of a musical saw, composed and played by Green musician Angelina Kartsaki, also added to the eerie sentiments evoked by the documentary, a place where gloomy political, cultural and personal memories of people who have been impacted by Indonesia's ruthless political elites collide.

This documentary is indeed a haunting piece of art that will linger long after you have seen it. Despite its bleak overtones, however, the film will not make you pessimistic about Indonesia's political future. Instead, Leon's role-model figure as a restless intellectual who worked for the betterment of his society would also inspire you to resist oppressors and improve Indonesia through activism, intellectualism, literature and the arts.

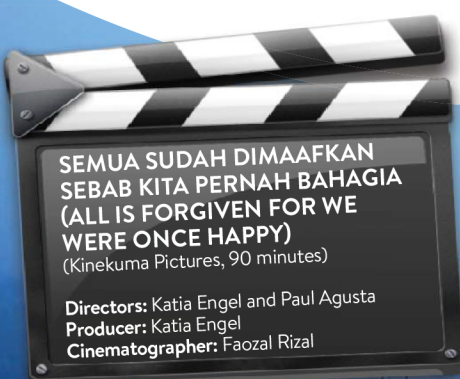
— PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATIA ENGEL



Younger years: A photo of Leon Agusta as a young poet, working on his typewriter.



Leon Agusta



Calming view: The view of Maninjau in West Sumatra, the birthplace of Leon Agusta.