



Presents

Singapore's Official Submission for Best Foreign Film - 89th Academy Awards

APPRENTICE

A film by Junfeng Boo

"Tightly focused and ambitious" – Screen Daily



**Singapore, Germany, France, Hong Kong, Qatar / 2016 / Drama / Malay with English Subtitles
96 min / 1.85:1 / 2.0 and 5.1 Surround Sound**

Opens in NY on March 3rd at Village East Cinema

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ASSETS

Official US Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFXg4hP71KM&feature=youtu.be>

Downloadable hi-res images:

www.filmmovement.com/filmcatalog/index.asp?MerchandiseID=523

SYNOPSIS

APPRENTICE stars impressive newcomer Fir Rhaman in his first feature film. He plays Aiman, a 28-year-old Malay correctional officer who is recently transferred to the territory's top prison. At his new workplace, Aiman begins to take an interest in a 65-year-old sergeant named Rahim (veteran actor Wan Hanafi Su). Soon, it is revealed that the charismatic Rahim is actually the long-serving chief executioner of the prison. Rahim also takes notice of the principled and diligent Aiman, and when Rahim's assistant suddenly quits, he asks Aiman to become his apprentice. When Aiman, who lives with his older sister Suhaila, tells her about his new position, she becomes distraught, as their father was actually executed by Rahim. Can Aiman overcome his conscience and a haunted past to possibly take over as the next chief executioner? APPRENTICE boasts the same cinematographer, Benoit Soler, as ILO ILO (winner of the Camera d'Or in Cannes and released by Film Movement in 2014) and is executive produced by filmmaker Eric Khoo. Junfeng Boo's second feature film premiered at Un Certain Regard at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

When ambitious young correctional officer Aiman is transferred to the country's highest-security prison, he catches the attention of the seasoned chief executioner Rahim. Aiman's desire to become the hangman's apprentice is not only professional but born of an unspeakable urge to reconnect with a past that haunts him. Far from being a conventional prison movie, this slow-burning psychological thriller is a "stunning" (Film School Rejects) and "tightly focused and ambitious" (Screen Daily) look at all the lives affected by capital punishment.

LOGLINE

A correctional officer becomes friends with the chief executioner of a prison and then is tapped to become his trainee.

Credits

CREW

Written and Directed By
Story by
Producers

Executive Producers

Co-Executive Producers

Associate Producers
Director of Photography
Production Designer

Editors

Art Director

Costumer Designer

Supervising Sound Editor

Composers

Junfeng Boo

Junfeng Boo, Raymond Phathanavirangoon

Raymond Phathanavirangoon, Fran Borgia, Fong Cheng
Tan

Eric Khoo, Pang Ho-Cheung, Subi Liang, Jim Rogers, Paige
Parker

Alvin Chau, Alex Dong, Jonas Katzenstein, Maximilian Leo,
Tom Dercourt, Sophie Erbs

Huang Junxiang, Rachel Higgins, Philipp Stendebach

Benoit Soler

James Page

Natalie Soh, Lee Chatametikool

Andy Phua

Meredith Lee

Ting Li Lim

Alexander Zekke, Matthew James Kelly

CAST

Aiman

Rahim

Suhaila

James

Joseph

Randy

Hock

Rahman Fir

Su Wan Hanafi

Ahmad Mastura

Boon Pin Koh

Nickson Cheng

Crispian Chan

Gerald Chew



BIOGRAPHY: Junfeng Boo, Director

Junfeng Boo made his feature-length directorial debut in 2010 with *SANDCASTLE*, which premiered at the International Critics' Week during the Cannes Film Festival. The film was subsequently invited to film festivals including Toronto, Pusan, Vancouver and London, among others.

It won several awards, including Best Film, Best Director and NETPAC Jury Award at the Vietnam International Film Festival, Best Cinematography and Special Jury Mention at the Gotham Screen International Film Festival, Best Local Film & Best Local Director at the Singapore Entertainment Awards 2011, and was listed by *The Wall Street Journal* as one of Asia's most notable films of 2010.

Trained in film schools in Singapore and Spain, Junfeng Boo's award-winning short films include *UN RETRATO DE FAMILIA* (2005), *STRANGER* (2005), *THE CHANGI MURALS* (2006), *KATONG FUGUE* (2007), *KELUAR BARIS* (2008) and *TANJONG RHU* (2009). In 2009, he became the first recipient of the McNally Award for Excellence in the Arts – the valedictorian honor of Lasalle College of the Arts. He was also conferred the Young Artist Award in 2009, and the Singapore Youth Award in 2011 by the government of Singapore.

Filmography

Feature

APPRENTICE (2016)
SANDCASTLE (2010)

Shorts

7 LETTERS (2015, Omnibus)
TANJONG RHU (THE CASUARINA COVE) (2009)
KELUAR BARIS (HOMECOMING) (2008)
KATONG FUGUE (2007)
THE CHANGI MURALS (2006)
GUO KE (STRANGER) (2005)
UN RETRATO DE FAMILIA (A FAMILY PORTRAIT) (2005)



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Capital punishment, in countries where it is still practiced, is often viewed as the ultimate form of justice and a deterrent to crime. Amidst the debates and narratives surrounding the subject, a key character whose point of view we tend to neglect is the person tasked to pull the lever – the executioner. What does it mean to be empowered to kill? Is he merely doing a job? Where does he see himself in the moral and ethical equation?

Also absent are voices from family members of the executed. Prisoners on death row often come from an already impoverished stratum of society – how would the death penalty further affect these families?

The film looks at both perspectives through our conflicted protagonist, Aiman. His struggle to reconcile authority with morality presents dimensions to the issue rarely brought up in discussions.

A Psychological Space

Larangan Prison (literally meaning “Forbidden Prison”) is a spatial representation of Aiman’s mental state. It is a character in its own right – dark yet sterile, with corridors echoing faraway sounds as if haunted by the past.

As Aiman navigates the corridors in search of spaces his father spent his last days, he is also journeying deep into himself. He stares into the abyss and confronts his fears, eventually finding his way into the gallows. I intend the atmosphere of the prison to evoke mystery and loss. The light and shadows cast by fluorescent lights and grille windows set a caliginous tone for the film.

The only place that offers Aiman some warmth and solace is the flat he shares with his sister Suhaila, a typical public housing unit in a working-class suburb of Singapore. Here, we can feel the textures and rhythms of everyday life.

Four Years of Research and Production

The languages spoken are determined by the characters’ ethnicity. Aiman, Rahim and Suhaila are Malay, the indigenous minority of Singapore. Malay is usually spoken at home, but English, Singapore’s lingua franca, is used for work. So when Rahim talks to Aiman in Malay in the prison, a more intimate bond between them is forged.

In the course of writing, research and production over the past four years, I have interviewed many people whose stories have inspired and disturbed me. Among them are former executioners and religious counselors who have worked inside the system, and families trapped in a poverty cycle worsened by the execution of breadwinners. It has been a fascinating (and often tormenting) journey, trying to put myself in Aiman’s shoes. At a more visceral level, it has forced me to examine the complexity of the issues surrounding capital punishment – issues we have conveniently put out of sight and out of mind. – *Junfeng Boo*

Of Punishment and Forgiveness, Deterrence and Compassion: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JUNFENG BOO

Capital punishment is a frequent topic in movies, but this film surprisingly portrays the executioner Rahim as unrepentant and even proud of his profession. What prompted you to create such a character?

When I first began researching on the film, it was the bureaucratic stoicism surrounding executions that fascinated me. I wanted to believe that there was something human underneath it. We often see executions as an institutional thing, but ultimately, it is a human being who needs to pull the lever. I was interested to find out how one comes to terms with routinely performing capital punishments. Rahim's character is a result of that.

I initially expected executioners to be more haunted by the experience of their profession, and wrote an early treatment based upon this assumption. But when I met them in person, I was surprised that this was not necessarily the case. In fact, the ones whom I had interviewed took pride in what they did. They believed that they were helping to deliver justice on behalf of the state, and were among the very few who could bring themselves to do it. As such, they were able to morally justify the executions that they had performed without remorse. Moreover, what I found most shocking was how likable they were, and how normal their lives seemed to be – as parents, as co-workers and as citizens.

Admittedly, I was not expecting this, and this revelation completely upended my early interpretation of Rahim and his character. I was honestly at a loss for a while as to how I was going to rewrite Rahim – how is it possible to portray an executioner who is remorseless, yet still seems humane and relatable?

After a period of time, it dawned on me that, in many ways, this was as much my own story of discovery about the hangman as it is Aiman's. And I began to rewrite Rahim's character to reflect the realities of the executioners whom I had met.

Conversely, how Aiman is characterized is much more ambiguous from the start, from his intentions to his personal attitude about executions. This despite him being personally adversely affected by the death penalty. Why did you decide to make him less sure of his stance on executions, when it was clear how badly he was affected by the law?

To me, Aiman's journey reflects in many ways my own journey into this story. Although I have my own perspectives about the death penalty prior to making this film, the research process definitely challenged many of my preconceived notions about the subject matter, even if in the end it did not change my views. Therefore, I intentionally wrote Aiman's character to hew close to the audience's point of view – his ambivalent, conflicted feelings about capital punishment from the start reflects many viewers' positions as well.

On one hand, Aiman has every reason to despise what his father did, and how it had adversely affected his own life. And to show that he is not like his father, he purposefully sides with the law by becoming its enforcer. With this line of thinking, Aiman could easily be seen as a proponent of the death penalty, as he would feel that his father deserved his punishment under the law. On the other hand, the fact that Aiman grew out of his delinquent past despite the sins of his father demonstrates that people are capable of changing. With this viewpoint, he ends up empathizing with the offenders and thus believes in rehabilitation and second chances – notions at odds with capital punishment.

This contention between what is right and wrong is, in effect, a reflection of the disparate views surrounding capital punishment. And Aiman’s unique position as both victim and enforcer of the law means that he embodies all of these conflicting ideals. The tensions between punishment and forgiveness, deterrence and compassion are central to any debate about the death penalty. As such, Aiman acts as a conduit whereby people form their opinions on the issue based upon where their conscience lay.

For Aiman himself, this issue is also clearly a personal one. As he enters the spaces where his father spent his last days, he is also trying to find a sliver of redemption for the man whom everyone else has deemed a monster. The conflicting emotions that come his way – from his responsibilities as a prison officer, the executions he witnesses, his friendship and respect for Rahim, his sister’s incessant concern and imminent departure – they all pile up, and pushes him into a crisis of conscience.

The lead characters in the film are all Malay, but it seems clear that the majority of officers in the film are Chinese. How did you decide to make the leads all primarily Malay? And were racial aspects figured into the film?

I had the intention of casting “colorblind” from the start and was ready to sculpt the characters according to the chosen actors. We invited actors of different races to try for the lead roles. In the end, we found Wan Hanafi Su and Fir Rahman to have the best chemistry between them. That was when I decided to make both characters Malay. This required a substantial rewrite to include cultural and racial nuances, but we kept the characters and their relationships intact.

Moreover, I believe the race factor added an interesting layer to their relationship in the film. Both characters were originally written as outsiders who did not completely fit into the system. Now that they are both from the same minority group and speak the same language, they form an even stronger bond with one another.

ADDITIONAL BIOS

Rahman FIR (as Aiman)

Fir Rahman is a versatile actor with a foundation from the local Malay theatre and TV entertainment scene. He emerged as winner in a Singaporean network's talent competition, Juara, in the 'Suria's New Face' category. Over the years, Fir has honed his craft across multiple leading and supporting roles, appearing in a string of popular Singaporean television programs. APPRENTICE (2016) by Junfeng Boo is his first feature film.

Su WAN HANAFI (as Rahim)

A veteran actor in Malaysia who has an extensive background in theatre, Wan Hanafi Su has worked in the entertainment industry for over 20 years. A reclusive talent, his discerning nature has seen him appear in just a handful films – works which have earned him popular and critical acclaim. With his deep baritone and distinguished yet weathered look, Hanafi Su delivers roles with gravitas. Some of his famous works include THE MALAY CHRONICLES: BLOODLINES (2011) by Yusry bin Abdul Halim, BUNOHAN: RETURN TO MURDER (2011) by Dain Said, and Liew Seng Tat's MEN WHO SAVE THE WORLD (2014), among others.

Ahmad MASTURA (as Suhaila)

A versatile theatre, television and film actress as well as TV host, Mastura Ahmad is a familiar face in Singapore and Malaysia. She is a regular award-winner at Mediacorp TV Suria's Pesta Perdana Awards, having won Best Actress twice for JERITAN SEPI in 2001 and 2002 as well as Best Supporting Actress twice for DIMENSI KE-4 (2007) and MANDAI UNITED (2009). Apart from hosting numerous television programmes, her feature film starring roles include SALAWATI (2008) by Marc X. Grigoroff (2008) as well as 2014's BANTING, directed by Raihan Halim.



Select Press for APPRENTICE

"[T]here's no question that this *Un Certain Regard* premiere's directorial flair and thematic complexity...should help further consolidate Boo's own reputation as one of the region's names to watch." – *Boyd van Hoeij, The Hollywood Reporter*

"Sublime....This is an important exploration of capital punishment..." – *Eric Ortiz Garcia, Screen Anarchy*

"Haunting." – *Emily Buder, No Film School*

"Compelling and atmospheric." – *Joyce Choong, The Culture Trip*

"APPRENTICE could very well mark the way for a new Singaporean cinema that was glimpsed upon with the remarkable ILO ILO a few years prior....Director Junfeng Boo has instilled the film with a deep humanity...." – *Kwenton Bellette, The Lowdown Under*

"Shooting digitally on an Arri Alexa, [director of photography] Benoit Soler evokes the contrast-rich look of '70s film stocks, where details — and our imaginations — tend to get lost in the deep, inky black shadows." – *Peter Debruge, Variety*

"APPRENTICE is an extremely well-researched, very detailed, absorbing trip...that impresses all of the way through with its clever story structure, and if you pardon the pun, excellent execution. Highly recommended." – *Paul Heath, The Hollywood News*

"...achieved without preaching or using strawmen or stereotyping. He [Boo] puts a human face on the abstract idea of capital punishment." – *John Lui, Straits Times*

"This slow-burning drama set in a Singaporean prison explores the charged issue of the death penalty from the point of view of an aspiring executioner who becomes morbidly fascinated with his new trade." – *Courtney Small, Cinema Axis*

"Stunning film — riddled with shadows, brutally workmanlike style, and wrenching performances..." – *Jacob Oller, Film School Rejects*

"A quiet drama that methodically reveals layer after layer of Singapore's interwoven personal and social fabric; APPRENTICE's prison is as much metaphor as it is physical space." – *Elizabeth Kerr, China Daily Asia*

"A classically styled critique of the country's death penalty (its unfussy approach suggests late-career Clint Eastwood) from relative newcomer Boo Junfeng." – *Peter Debruge, Variety*

"Only 33 years old, Singaporean filmmaker Boo Junfeng is fast making a name for himself in Asia's arthouse arena, not least because of this crackling prison drama." – *James Marsh, Screen Anarchy*

"A thought-provoking meditation on death and capital punishment in one of the smartest character studies made this year." – *Palm Springs Film Festival International Film Festival*

AWARDS & SELECT FILM FESTIVALS

AWARDS:

Rising Director Award – 2016 Busan International Film Festival
Best Film Award, Asian New Wave – QCinema International Film Festival
Golden Orchid Special Mention for Best Acting Ensemble – Hawaii IFF
Interfaith Award for Best Narrative Feature – St. Louis IFF
NETPAC Award – Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards

OFFICIAL SELECTION:

2016 Cannes International Film Festival – Un Certain Regard
2016 Toronto International Film Festival
2016 Sydney Film Festival
2016 London Film Festival
2016 Jerusalem Film Festival
2016 New Horizons Film Festival
2016 Melbourne International Film Festival
2016 Busan International Film Festival
2016 Chicago International Film Festival
2016 Philadelphia Film Festival
2016 Asian World Film Festival
2016 Hawaii International Film Festival
2016 St. Louis International Film Festival
2016 3 Rivers Film Festival
2016 Palm Springs International Film Festival

About Film Movement

Celebrating its 15th year in 2017, Film Movement is a North American distributor of award-winning independent and foreign films based in New York City. Film Movement has released more than 250 feature films and shorts culled from prestigious film festivals worldwide, and last year it had its first Academy Award-nominated film, THEEB. Film Movement's theatrical distribution strategy has evolved to include promising American independent films, documentaries, and an even stronger slate of foreign art house titles. In 2015, Film Movement launched its reissue label Film Movement Classics, featuring new restorations released theatrically as well as on Blu-ray and DVD, including films by such noted directors as Eric Rohmer, Peter Greenaway, Bille August, Marleen Gorris, Takeshi Kitano and Ettore Scola. For more information, please visit www.filmmovement.com.