

# On a promise

By Yenni Kwok



Janji Joni. Photo: Joko Anwar

Many filmmakers find their calling after spending too much time in the cinema. For Joko Anwar, the Indonesian director of *Joni's Promise*, however, inspiration came from just one, interrupted, screening.

It happened in 1997, and Joko - then an engineering student in Bandung - was watching Alan Pakula's *The Devil's Own*. Just when Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt were having an all-out brawl, the screen went blank. Rather than following the rest of the audience out, Joko stormed into the projection room and confronted the projectionist. "He told me that the film delivery guy got into an accident," says the 30-year-old director.

The incident made such an impression that Joko went home and developed it into a script for a feature-length film. And as happens with the work of many aspiring writers, the script, which centres on the bumbling travails of a film-reel delivery boy, quickly found its way into a bottom drawer, seemingly condemned to obscurity.

Its fate seemed irredeemable when Joko failed to find work in production houses after his graduation. Instead, he went to work as a movie critic for *The Jakarta Post*. "I thought that if I worked as a journalist, I might meet filmmakers and be able to bulls\*\*\* my way into the business," he says, with a laugh.

His stint as a scribe led to a meeting with producer-director Nia Dinata. She

later asked him to write a script for her feature *Arisan!*, which was a commercial and critical success. Nia eventually got her hands on the script that had been languishing in Joko's house for years and gave the green light to what would become *Joni's Promise*.

Joko's directorial debut, described as an adventure-comedy, centres on Joni (Nicholas Saputra), who ferries reels of film around town for a living. The delivery boy finds himself in a race against time to get a young woman her favourite movie. What starts out as a typical day for Joni soon turns into a dizzying nightmare, as the streets of Jakarta conspire against him.

A box-office hit, *Joni's Promise* reflects a revival in the Indonesian film industry, which went through a slump in the 1980s and 90s. It also provides audiences with a fun, light-hearted image of Indonesia, in contrast to the ethnic strife and religious conflict found in the international media.

"Many Indonesian filmmakers want to tackle these themes, but producers know these movies will invite trouble, so they won't finance it," says Joko, winner of the Emerging Filmmaker Award at last year's New York Asian American International Film Festival. "So, what we do is subtly plant little parts of these subjects in our movies. You can see it in most Indonesian films."

His next film, to be shot in September and tentatively called *Dead Time*, is set in a not-too-distant-future Indonesia, when "intolerance - religious and cultural - has caused the nation to disintegrate", Joko says.

Far from the fun-fest that is *Joni's Promise*, Joko wants to "push it". "Somebody needs to break those barriers," he says.

"It's a thriller in a noir style. I can't tell you the story yet, but the working tagline is: 'A jaded cop. A narcoleptic journalist. A nation divided. A fantasy you wish would never come true'."

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