
BECAAAK!

Marselli Sumarno

Translated by Stephen J. Epstein

About the Author: Marselli Sumarno was born in Solo in Central Java in 1956. He graduated in 1980 from the Department of Cinematography at Lembaga Pendidikan Kesenian Jakarta (LPKJ), now known as the Faculty of Film and Television at the Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ), and is in fact better known for his work as a film critic than for his fiction. Since 1979 he has been active in writing on film and television for such publications as *Kompas* and *The Jakarta Post*, and has also been involved in a variety of activities in the national film industry, including acting as a member of the jury for the 1984 and 1985 Film Festival Indonesia. He has covered several international festivals and acted as a correspondent for the film magazine *Cinemaya*, published in India, as well as the English annual *Variety International Film Guide*. From 1990-1993 he served as a member of the Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, and since 1994 has acted as the chairman of the Department of Media Studies in the Faculty of Film and Television at IKJ.

Marselli Sumarno has published some twenty-five short stories in such venues as *Zaman* and *Kompas*, but has yet to compile an anthology of his own work. His literary output also includes several screenplays including *Tragedi Bintaro* and *Oom Pasikom*, and he has written three books: *Dasar-dasar Apresiasi Film* (Basics of Film Appreciation), *DA Peransi & Film*, and *Suata Sketsa Perfilman Indonesia* (A Sketch of Indonesian Film). At the end of 1997 he embarked upon a career as a director with a film entitled "Sri."

In just a little while the train carrying me from Jakarta will enter my hometown. What I hate most after arriving at the station is forcing my way through dozens—sometimes more than a hundred—*becak* drivers.¹ Maybe you've all experienced the same thing in your own towns. We don't get the chance to pick the *becak* we want and

¹A *becak* is a cycle rickshaw.

bargain for a reasonable price. Not at all. Instead they swarm around us, and it's absolutely exhausting. A salvo of offers greets us: "Where are you headed?" "This is the *becak* for you." "Let me take you." Not infrequently they have the gall to grab our belongings and practically force us on their vehicle.

Now, there's nothing excessive about all this, except for a feeling of irritation at having to act friendly when you realize at the same time that their friendliness is put on. At any rate, the motive is straightforward: they're angling for a few hundred rupiah more than usual. But they seem never to be satisfied and try to obtain as high a price as possible. When necessary, they'll deceive prospective passengers who seem unfamiliar with the area.

All I know is that playing around on a *becak* is a lot of fun. I did it often as a teenager, every Saturday night. Several friends and I would hire out a *becak* for the day and cruise the streets until morning. We'd take turns at the helm. Being the tallest, I always had problems with my knees bumping against the handlebars, but there was nothing to be done about it. One time we were riding around town and I was at the wheel. While we were horsing around, my leg became wedged against the handlebars. I lost control of the *becak* and we crashed into the door of a shoe store. My five friends screamed, of course. Some customers who were drinking coffee at a foodstall not far from us were startled, so we scattered in flight. Luckily, one of my friends had the presence of mind to make off with the *becak*.

This incident didn't cure us of our habit, though. It was easy enough to borrow a *becak* from my neighbors: all we had to do was provide a little cigarette money and any objections were sure to vanish. Besides, there were certain *becak* drivers we hired regularly, especially my mother, who went daily to market where she was a rice trader. One of these drivers was named *Pak Mul*.² His wife was extremely fertile—they had eleven children.

My mother enjoyed sharing our leftovers with *Pak Mul*'s family and would take advantage of the opportunity to advise *Bu Mul* not to keep having children one after the other. I remember when *Bu Mul* was carrying her tenth child; once mother brought her a plate of cakes and, as usual, handed it to her from the other side of the fence.

"My gosh, aren't you tired of having kids? It's time to stop, *Mbok*.³ Start using birth control."

"But honestly, *Bu*, we do use birth control! They just keep sneaking their way in," she answered, laughing.

"You're not serious about it," my mother protested.

"But, *Bu*, they're my only fun," she said, taking the cakes with her right hand, and supporting her bloated belly with the left. A week later she gave birth after hopping a *becak* to a maternity ward by herself. Meanwhile her husband was out on his own *becak*, plying his trade somewhere or other.

²I retain native terms of address in this translation: *Pak*, *Bu*, and *Mas*, literally equivalent to father, mother, and elder brother respectively, are generalized as respectful titles in Indonesian.

³The narrator's mother uses a Javanese term of address here.

Naturally it is difficult to imagine a large family with an uncertain income, that lives from hand to mouth, having a chance to have fun. Every evening *Bu Mul* would bathe her youngest children in a bucket of water by the side of the fence, dress them up, dab powder on the girls, and then serve dinner. Maybe this counted as fun for *Bu Mul*. But for her husband? Meanwhile her older children were already used to going off on their own.

The fate of *Pak Mul* was not terribly different from that of *Pak Karjo*. *Pak Karjo* had few children, but he was always pale, and not without reason: *Pak Karjo* preferred to set himself up in front of the hospital. Aside from waiting for passengers, he was always ready at the drop of a hat to sell his blood to patients who needed it. As it happens, he had the blood type of a universal donor. He made a pretty penny, enough to do things like buy a color TV, but because he didn't make up for it by taking proper care of his own health, misfortune followed. One afternoon he came home and asked his wife to rub him with a coin.⁴ "I've caught a cold," said *Bu Karjo*, imitating her husband. Evidently that was *Pak Karjo's* last sentence—he breathed his last before the coin rubdown was finished.

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The train pulled into the station. I hastily got up, just like the rest of the passengers, and straight away hefted a large bag onto my shoulders. Dear Allah, the swarm of *becak* drivers in the waiting area seemed to have doubled in size compared to past years. There were so many of them. I wasn't eager to leave the platform right away, but desire to arrive home set my legs in motion.

"Where are you heading, *Mas*? I'll take you." A voice rang in my ear suddenly when I stepped out on to the station plaza. I pretended not to notice.

"Where are you going?" the *becak* driver persisted. His words were certainly directed to me. I felt his hand upon my bag.

"Just close by," I answered brusquely.

"Well, let me take you."

I looked back at him. Damn, it was the same *becak* driver who twice in a row had succeeded in intercepting my journey home and eventually forcing me to get on his *becak*. The first time he had demanded a higher fare upon arrival at my home, although I had already given him more than enough ("Just this once, *Mas*," he said). On the last occasion I had been bargaining for another *becak* when he deliberately slipped between us with his skeletal frame and his own vehicle. In the end he had whined for more money.

I didn't want to lose out to *Skinny* this time. His age, I estimated, was not yet thirty. His scrawniness had become even more noticeable, but when do you ever see a fat *becak* driver? It may be that he forgot me, but I couldn't forget the way he looked. His attempt to overcharge me proved he had indeed forgotten.

⁴ The coin rubdown is a traditional healing method that is intended to bring blood close to the body's surface skin by scraping the skin over and over again with a coin.

"How much?" I asked on telling him where I was headed.

"A thousand, *Mas*."

Bastard, I cursed to myself. Without answering I strode off quickly, leaving him behind. I had lost interest in trying to bargain with another *becak* driver and immediately stepped outside the station plaza. It was still early morning. There would certainly be several *becak* I could take along the way.

"Just eight hundred, *Mas*," Skinny's voice was heard again. He shadowed me with his *becak*. I shook my head without looking back. "How much then?" he persisted.

"Four hundred," I answered in a rude tone.

"Oh, that's not enough, *Mas*. It's far, you know."

"What?" I shot back, annoyed. "I've gone with you twice, and it didn't cost that much."

Immediately his voice died away, and I pressed onward. He followed close behind, evidently scanning his memory for me. "That was a long time ago, *Mas*. Everything's expensive now. Fares can go up too."

"Not as much as that."

"How much then?"

"Four hundred. At midday, it's only three hundred," I answered.

"Okay, seven hundred, *Mas*."

"Uh-uh!"

"*Becak* drivers don't get rich, you know, *Mas*." His responses seemed to me more and more like arrogance. Whoever said you get rich pedaling a *becak*, fool! If he read the newspaper, he'd realize that not only *becak* drivers, but plenty of those who scrape to make ends meet are becoming worse off all the time. The poor cannot keep up. He was only a *becak* driver who was aware that his work would never improve his lot. But his fate was certainly a little better than that of beggars or those who had been laid off from work; better, too, than the unemployed, because by pedaling a *becak*, he was considered to be holding down a job even when he slept in it, regardless whether his pockets were empty and his belly was growling.

My anger had caused my breath to come faster. One more word of abuse from him, and I'd smack him in the mouth for sure.

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Dammit all. I didn't encounter another *becak*. Well, I did come across one or two, but their drivers were asleep, curled up inside their vehicles like fried prawns. Drops of sweat began to appear on my neck, and my shoulders felt stiff under the weight of my bag. My left hand found its way into the pocket of my trousers, and I clutched at my loose change so it wouldn't jingle.

"Six hundred, *Mas*, let me take you," he coaxed. His tone had become gentler.

"No!"

I passed the market where my mother traded rice. According to her, it was difficult to make a living these days, even though rice was cheap and supplies were good. Hard times were also evident in the way *becak* drivers fought for passengers at the market. They seemed to be afraid of losing their regular customers, so they would come into the market just as the vendors were heading home. They were willing to wait around in order to be guaranteed passengers, even if it meant transporting their wares, or anything else. My mother and her friends would joke with one another when they saw the *becak* drivers appear in the market.

"Hey, Tini, your chauffeur has arrived. Time to go home," my mother said, mimicking her friends. (Tini is my mother's name.)

The *becak* drivers at the market were certainly much more polite than the ones at the station. Maybe because they and their customers saw each other frequently and knew one another, a sense of affection had usually developed. I had experienced something of the sort: once I had taken a *becak* and when we arrived in front of my house, the old *becak* driver said, "Oh, you're Pak Hadi's son, aren't you?" Since he knew my father, I gave him the fare without asking for change. The old driver had thanked me profusely.

But how could they expect this sort of bond when the number of *becak* is perpetually on the rise? In Jakarta their area of operation is becoming more and more restricted and *becak* confiscated in raids are fated to be sunk in Jakarta Harbor to act as breakwaters.⁵ Quite different from my town: because the number of *becak* is constantly increasing, work hours have been divided. Red *becak* operate during the day, white *becak* at night. "But even though they're regulating how their earnings get split up, buses and the like are putting pressure on them. We have to be thankful that our lives are more comfortable than theirs," my mother had said once.

"Okay, *Mas*, four hundred," Skinny spoke again.

"No way!" I answered. "If you had wanted to before, fine, but we're almost there," I continued. Sweat trickled over my entire body, and my feet had become blistered by my leather shoes, still new. They really smarted. But I steeled myself to continue on and not to hail a *becak*, even if I came across an empty one. No. No need to feel any pity at this point. Skinny remained arrogantly perched on his seat, while I staggered onwards. My steps required more and more effort. He continued to dog my tracks with his *becak*.

"How much will you give, *Mas*?" he said as we made the final turn toward my *kampung*.⁶

"It's nicer to walk," I answered, panting. I felt that I had won.

⁵In the 1980s as part of the ideology of modernization, Jakarta governor Ali Sadikin banned *becak* in Indonesia's capital, and raids became commonplace. For further discussion, see Alison J. Murray, *No Money, No Honey: A Study of Street Traders and Prostitutes in Jakarta* (Singapore and New York, 1991), pp. 89-92.

⁶A lower-class urban neighborhood; also means village or district.

Oddly, he didn't want to stop. Maybe he was testing my resolve. Or was he regretting what he had done? Well, I didn't give a damn whether he kept following me or not, as long as the road was big enough for the *becak*.

As I passed through the gateway to my *kampung*, I pulled my left hand out of my pocket. Two 100 rupiah coins popped out and rolled into the gutter. Ah, let them go!

I looked back at the *becak* driver, who had stopped directly in front of the gateway. He got down and stood there while gripping the handlebars. As I walked, I looked round again and he was standing still, like a statue.

When I got home I told my mother what had happened. She gazed at me in silence for a long time. Finally she spoke. "I think you need to try being a *becak* driver."⁷

Kompas, 24 November 1985

⁷I would like to thank Kathleen Adams, Benedict Anderson, and David Kosofsky for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this translation.