

so  
one  
persia

**Yasmin Ahmad:  
an occasional friend.  
ben slater**

Yasmin Ahmad was a film director and an advertising creative director from Malaysia. I met her in Singapore just before the release of her film **Sepet** in 2004 and remained in sporadic contact with her until 2009.

She died on 23 July 2009.

It must have been exhausting to live every moment at such a level of extraordinary intensity. Very occasionally you'd see her pause, droop, take stock, suddenly look tired, and you knew that was the price she paid for constantly probing, playing, and being alive to just about everything around her.

A few hours in her company, particularly if it was just you and her, was thrilling and invigorating. When you said your goodbyes, you walked away feeling a few notches above your regular place in the world.

She had the ability to negotiate the most mundane situations with grace, elegance and wicked humour. Most of us get bogged down by the banality of our daily grind – but Yasmin Ahmad transformed reality by sheer force of personality.

When you were with her, anything was permitted and everything was possible.

It took a while to get used to.

The way she called you 'Baby' from your first meeting onwards. Or "*Sayang*" (love in Malay). And then she liked to call me "Slater!" in a cockney accent (She couldn't have known, but only a few other close friends call me that). The extraordinary frankness, bawdy jokes and playful teasing were so overwhelming that you had no option but to give in. She couldn't be resisted.

Each time before meeting up with her I would mentally prepare myself, sharpen my senses. Being with Yasmin wasn't necessarily relaxing. But that was the point.

In her work and in her life she asked questions and made statements to which there were no easy replies.

I was in a lift with her and actress Sharifah Amani, who I'd only just met, and Yasmin glanced below my neck and asked gruffly – "Why are your nipples so erect?"

As we arrived together to see a film she announced to the festival organiser in hearty voice, "I'm an SPG and I'm with my *ang moh* (caucasian) boyfriend".

Another time we met early in the morning in her hotel room, and drank packet drinks from the mini-bar and she got angry with me for stifling my burps – "Just let it out!" she cried, and much to her annoyance I just couldn't.

When we met up a few days after the premiere of **Gubra** in Singapore she'd taken my arm in hers while I politely inquired where her husband was (he'd attended the screening). Without blinking she said – "In bed with your wife" grinning at her own wickedness and pulling me closer.

Small talk wasn't in Yasmin's book, she liked to tear it up, scatter it on the flowerbeds. She wanted to get straight to the good stuff.

Another time we were both admiring the talents of a female Malaysian director who she knew well and I, a little. Yasmin stopped for a beat and said “Don’t you think she has beautiful tits?” Another question that I couldn’t answer. I stammered something about not having noticed. Yasmin, undeterred by my reticence continued to enthuse passionately about the young woman’s physique. I shyly refused to give in and agree with her – but as with many things, I’m sure that Yasmin was right.

For a lot of people, becoming successful, lauded, admired, awarded and even famous might be an excuse to surround yourself with people who directly reflect back that success – the beautiful, intelligent, trendy, high-achievers, etc. But Yasmin was interested in everybody and anybody, from the Ipoh-born waiter at Prego’s to the Filipino girls in the department store. Those who’ve hung out with her for even the briefest amount of time will attest to her gift for charming the underwear off service staff. She also collected a wide and ever-changing entourage of admirers, contacts and acquaintances of various ages and experiences. As long as they liked her and she liked them, she embraced all comers without prejudice, including myself.

Yasmin seemed to be addicted to people. She adored company, conversation, hugs and kisses, jokes and stories; and she made sure that those she loved were rarely far away. Several times I met her when she was between meetings, leaving someone to see me and then leaving me to see someone else. After a few hours with Yasmin I would need to calm down for a while, but she was onto the next appointment – her relentless energy hardly flagging. I wonder now if she was afraid of being alone.

She must have been aware that her personality and her films were profoundly linked, and that if you ‘got’ her, you’d be far more inclined to appreciate the movies. As such she developed a very strong cult around her – running the gamut from feisty young Malay girls in *tudungs* (headscarves) who piled into her screenings en masse, to misfit boys of all ages and races who talked to her on the web.

Her blog, where she posted film clips, images and poetry with an almost pedagogical zeal (she’d even set questions for her readers), became a channel for wider communication with the world. When I first visited the site I’d never seen a blog post with 300 comments before, but this was fairly typical. It wasn’t calculated though, she genuinely loved to reach and be reachable, but one thing she certainly carried over from her career in advertising was a strong understanding that you win your audience over, one person at a time.

In our conversations she enjoyed playing the ingénue. The naïve *savant* who just happened to make adverts and films that were praised all over the world.

“I can do whatever I want, they give me absolute freedom, so really they’re just short, little films”, she’d say of the Petronas holiday commercials.

“But Yasmin, they’re paid for by the oil company” I’d say.

“But I don’t have to show the product”, she’d counter, amused at my frustration.

And then I'd find myself in the absurd position of explaining branding to one of the world's most talented advertising directors, all the while she was grinning mischievously. "...and you know that!" I'd conclude, exasperated, and she'd nod.

Of course she knew. But she also knew what a radical achievement those commercials were, and it was a great source of pride.

To listen to Yasmin was to experience a world that was very different from mine. I'm a cynical bastard, but in Yasmin's reality, powerful CEOs would be melted by the truth of her ideas and hand over cash without conditions, senior politicians would request for her by name, and she had plenty of stories like this, of optimism and good-will in high places.

But she also lived in a place tougher than I could ever imagine, where her films were censored, decried, castigated, where sections of the media and its backers were out to encourage hatred against her. Without doubt there were some very tough times.

"I don't make films for festivals or for multiplexes, I don't care about that, I just make them for my parents", she often said. "I don't mind if people think they're crap, maybe they are", then she'd express true astonishment at some review, award or offer of finance from a rich businessman who'd wept during **Sepet**. "My little film," she'd say and look down at the ground with a wistful smile, as if it was all a big mistake. Despite this self-deprecation she was immensely proud of the films when they were celebrated, sending out text messages at all times of the night to confirm the news of some festival prize granted in a distant time zone.

Now I miss being woken up at 4am, to find out what she'd won. And this never felt like boasting, it was simply an expression of surprise and joy.

She professed to mistrust film theory and even film criticism. She found that too much was read into her films or anyone else's. If a film was good, what it was about and what it intended to do should be very clear – it didn't need to be picked over and analysed. You either got it or you didn't. But she was curious about academia, and I suspect she longed for that kind of approval as much as she wanted good reviews. When I told her I was about to start teaching a Film Studies class in Singapore, she half-seriously threatened to attend.

One reason she was initially interested in me was because I was a writer, and she cultivated critics and academics among her occasional friends. She kept close track of which films we liked and which ones we liked less – "You like **Rabun** the most," she'd declare, even before I'd told her, and I could see her mentally filing me away with all of those others who put **Rabun** at the top of the list (we are a particular tribe).

When I mentioned to another film critic that I'd found **Gubra** a bit too sweet in its portrayal of 'liberal Muslims', I made her promise not to tell her. The next time I saw Yasmin, she'd somehow found out – and there followed a stumbling defence of my flimsy opinion.

Yasmin didn't say much, but I could see disappointment in her eyes. We had a good time that day, but I didn't see her after that for well over a year.

We often talked about her sentimentality, the high-level of emotions in her films, which was for many critics a big stumbling block. She was articulate and passionate in her defence of those scenes. It came down to her knowing that she meant it and that was all that mattered. She said she didn't want to manipulate or cajole her audience into feeling. Although I the last time I saw her, after we watched **Muallaf** I admitted that I'd nearly cried when the son returns to embrace his mother, and she'd smiled as if it was a job well done.

Not long before I'd sent her a text message when **Muallaf** was mentioned on the BBC World Service, concerning the furore when Amani's shaved head made the Malaysian papers. "They're talking about you on the BBC" I wrote. A minute later the phone rang.

"Baby. What channel was it on?"

I explained it was the radio, which clearly wasn't as exciting to her as TV, but then we chatted for the first time in a long while. She was going to be in Singapore later that month, and we'd try and meet up.

She was consulting with various civil servants and ministers pitching ideas for the government public service film that she would later make promoting family. I live close to the airport and because her schedule was so packed I suggested we meet there, while she was waiting for the plane out of town.

I remember secretly hoping that she was travelling alone, so I could have her to myself. She was.

We wasted a couple of lovely hours in Terminal 2, catching up, telling stories, enthusing about movies. She'd made a staggering two feature films since I'd last seen her – **Muhksin**, which I had to confess to watching only on DVD (it suffered an almost invisible cinema release in Singapore), and the upcoming **Muallaf**, and then she was already talking about **Talentine**, which would be her last.

We moved from Starbucks to a pair of plastic chairs with a view of Starbucks. Then to an Indonesian restaurant upstairs where I was buying food to take home for dinner. Yasmin, of course, took great pleasure in learning about the love life of the young, good-looking Filipino waiter.

Over the years I'd known Yasmin, and during our infrequent, but always memorable meetings, I don't recall that she'd ever given me much guidance or advice. Her model for living, her curiosity, generosity and amusement were already enough to absorb and try to live by. But for some reason, this afternoon she had some things to say.

I had told her I was now working as a script editor, and one film I'd worked on had been shot and another was on the way. I was vainly hoping she'd offer to send me the screenplay for **Talentine** to take a look, but she didn't rise to that. Instead she insisted that I should write my own scripts. And this is advice I'm still trying to take.

Later on, she turned to me, apropos of nothing, and said, "Are you going to have kids soon?"

I gave an embarrassed, non-committal answer.

“You should,” she said, “I think you’d make a great Dad.” I blushed at the simple sincerity of those words. No one had said that to me before. I was moved, thanked her politely and changed the subject back to movies.

Perhaps, because it had been a while since we’d seen each other, when she was saying farewell outside departures, after we’d hugged, she said “I’ve missed talking to you Slater, lets do it again - soon”.

I did see her once more after that. At the screening of **Muallaf** organised by some friends of hers in Singapore. But that precious afternoon in Changi T2 was the last time it was just the two of us, and selfishly, it feels to me like that really was the last time.

Before she flew back to KL, I asked if I could come visit her while she was shooting her Singapore propaganda, and she said “Yes, do, although it’s very boring on my sets.”

I didn’t follow up on this, neither did I call or text her during her many subsequent trips to Singapore, when she was promoting **Muallaf** and making another film for the government, one that became a phenomenal success.

Like everyone who was an occasional friend of Yasmin’s, I wish now I’d tried to see her more often.

But in the end, I’m truly glad I spent some time with her.

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