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Marthino Lio Ajo Kawir
Ladya Cheryl Iteung
Reza Rahadian Budi Baik
Ratu Felisha Jelita
Sal Priadi Tokek
Kevin Ardillova Mono Ompong
Kiki Narendra Kumbang
Djenar Maesa Ayu Rona Merah
Eduward Manalu Kumis
Lukman Sardi Codet
Ayu Laksmi Wa Sami
Yudi Ahmad Tajudin Iwan Angsa
Piet Pagau Paman Gembul
Elly D. Luthan Oma
Cecep Arif Rahman Ki Jempes
Christine Hakim Mak Jerot

CREW

Directed by **Edwin**
Produced by **Meiske Taurisia** and **Muhammad Zaidy**
Screenplay by **Edwin & Eka Kurniawan**
Based on the Novel by **Eka Kurniawan**
Executive Producers **Natalie Balakrishnan**, **Natasha Sidharta** and **Willawati**
Director of Photography **Akiko Ashizawa**, J.S.C.
Art Director **Eros Eflin**
Film Editor **Lee Chatametikool**
Music by **Dave Lumenta**
Wardrobe Stylist **Gemailla Gea Geriantiana**





VENGEANCE IS BEAUTY: CULTURE, ROMANCE AND REVENGE IN THE NEW ORDER

by Josh Hurtado

With a title like *Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, Indonesian arthouse favourite Edwin sets the bar pretty high for himself. It takes a special talent and a very special film to be able to live up to a title this bold, but Edwin's work not only does just that – it easily clears that bar. *Vengeance is Mine* delivers a new arthouse genre film that sets itself apart from the crowd by using its rough-and-tumble fights to tell a complex story of star-crossed lovers, toxic masculinity, betrayal, regret and, of course, bloody revenge.

An adaptation of the 2014 novel of the same name by Eka Kurniawan, *Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* marks Edwin's first adaptation of an existing text, and that in itself brought challenges to the project. In 2016 Eka Kurniawan became Indonesia's first ever nominee for the prestigious Man Booker International Award for literature for his book, *Beauty is a Wound*. Coincidentally, that's the same year Edwin discovered *Vengeance is Mine* and decided it would be a fascinating challenge to adapt.

Along with his producing team at Palari Films, Edwin and Kurniawan got to work transforming this book into a screenplay – not always an easy task. The pair wanted to create an adaptation that was both respectful of the source material and of the purpose and possibility of transposing the written word to the cinema. Language and structure change, idiomatic behaviour changes, visual references become a part of the dialogue that a film has with its audience, and for a film set in 1989, it only makes sense to pay homage to the cinema of the time.

The 80s and 90s were perilous days in Indonesia, as the President Suharto's New Order regime was nearing its end. They say that the most dangerous animal in the jungle is the wounded one, as it is always fighting for its life, and with less than a decade remaining of his thirty-year reign, Suharto's regime was desperate to hold on to power. The military







violence that had kept him in office since the 60s had become ingrained as the dominant form of masculine expression, and the cinema of the time expressed that very narrow view of masculinity.

Action cinema was at its ludicrous height in the 80s, not only in America with films like the *Rambo* sequels, which showed an American super soldier laying waste to South and East Asian nations, but also in those very nations, which picked up on the muscular heroes and their testosterone laden exploits. Indonesia, whose cinema at the time was incredibly local and didn't travel much, was no different. Filmmakers like Arizal (*Special Silencers*, *American Hunter*, *The Stabilizer*) and local heroes like Barry Prima (*The Devil's Sword*, *The Warrior*) gave Indonesian youth an image of masculinity that was virtually impossible to live up to, but they also provided endless entertainment and a framework for reference that *Vengeance is Mine* uses perfectly to evoke the period.

In addition to the production design and art direction of the film being used to conjure memories of the time, Edwin and his cinematographer, Akiko Ashizawa, decided that the medium itself could be part of the message. Ashizawa, a regular collaborator of Kiyoshi Kurosawa, chose to shoot on 16mm film, a potentially costly decision that pays off handsomely in the final product. The natural, lived-in look of *Vengeance is Mine* – including

occasional wear and tear in the finished film – gives the audience the feeling that they are looking through a window into a story from the time in a way that contemporary digital cannot do.

While all of the technical aspects of the film are crucial to its success – from the shooting formats, to the design choices, to the gloriously outdated hairstyles and clothing – it's the story and those telling it that really determine its success. The story of *Vengeance is Mine* is one that not only is unique but also connects the era in which it takes place to the current conversations around masculinity and its expression around the world.

Ajo Kawir, played by relative newcomer Marthino Lio, is a rural Javanese hooligan with a problem: he can't get it up. His impotence is no secret to anyone in town – his friends and family all know, and the only way he can keep from being ostracized completely is to express his manhood in other ways, most notably through violence. Ajo is always happy to take on all comers, and once he's been through them, he actively seeks out new challenges, hoping that one day he'll prove to himself that he is a man. In a strange way it is the fighting that ultimately sets him free, but not in the way he's expecting.

When he's contracted to take down a local mafia boss, he discovers that he must first go through the man's bodyguard, a rowdy woman named Iteung – played by Edwin regular Ladya Cheryl – who is every bit the fighting machine Ajo is, and perhaps even more. Their initial tussle – a mix of highly choreographed classic martial arts and wrestling that feels both somewhat scripted and also down and dirty – turns into something of a violent dance by the end, igniting a romance that neither saw coming, but both needed in their lives.

Ajo is more of a scrapper who cut his teeth in barroom brawls attempting to prove to everyone – including himself – that he is the toughest son of a bitch in the room. Iteung, on the other hand, feels more like a trained fighter. Edwin has stated that her character and style was influenced by the ultimate 80s badass, Cynthia Rothrock (Yes,







Madam, Millionaires' Express, Righting Wrongs), and while the hair doesn't quite match, you can definitely see the Rothrock influences once the fists start to fly. However, having worked with Edwin on many of his previous films, it's clear that Ladya Cheryl isn't just a pretty face with fists and feet of fury – she's able to carry a very heavy story on her shoulders.

Iteung sees through Ajo, a fragile man who defines himself by his impotence. Behind the façade of rage, she sees a loving and lovable man; his sexually inadequacy doesn't seem to bother her, as these two fighters are the only ones who really understand one another in ways that the outside world cannot fathom. When they finally attempt to consummate their feelings for each other after hours at a low rent carnival ride, Ajo satisfies her manually, but when she attempts to reciprocate, he refuses. Better to not even start a task that he knows she cannot finish.

Eventually, they settle into a new life, away from the pain and humiliation of their former pugilist selves. Following their wedding, they set up the appropriately named New Hope repair shop – a not-so-subtle symbol of the life they aim to live. But it isn't long before the couple's pasts come knocking and their happily-ever-after is wrenched from them. Here we learn that the origin of Ajo's impotence stems from a sexual assault he witnessed as child. Two men – maybe thugs, maybe military, maybe just garden variety **scumbags** – rape a woman as Ajo and his best friend watch; here Ajo's first experience of an erect penis is as an implement of violence.

Iteung's past is also not quite done with her when she goes to Budi (Reza Rahadian), a former associate and admirer, looking for help in finding and punishing the men who scarred her husband so brutally. Here the fairytale romance begins to dissolve. Iteung replays the violent seduction that led her to a life with Ajo, but this time Budi is the target. She hates him, and with good reason – he is a sleazebag, the exact opposite of her beloved husband. Budi has moved from low rent mercenary work to selling leech oil – an aphrodisiac, appropriately enough. His virility is never in question,





and something primal in Iteung turns, sending her not quite into his arms, or even his bed, but certainly to scratch that singular itch that Ajo cannot, against her better judgment, and winds up pregnant.

She tells Ajo, he runs away, she mourns, time passes. Then: vengeance.

The second half of *Vengeance is Mine* is a remarkable restructuring of the traditional revenge narrative. It is a rape-revenge of a different kind. Ajo feels as though he's lost the life of his dream, and so he descends deeper into the violence he abandoned when he met Iteung, eventually ending up in jail, being mentored by – of all things – a blind master. Iteung, on the other hand, eager to not only prove to her Ajo that she loved him above all else, but also to serve penance for her own sins, goes on a rampage, determined to destroy every single person who took her happy ending.

We expect rape-revenge to be perpetrated by the rape victim upon those who assaulted them. In this case, it is Iteung who is determined to not only get revenge for her husband for his own sake, but also as an offering of love. He has left, careening through life without her, unable to forgive, but also unable to forget the life he so briefly held in his hands – a life he never imagined possible. She sees her task as the removal of obstacles one by one,





perhaps as a way to regaining the trust she broke, violently and creatively dispatching those who wronged Ajo, and, in Budi's case, repaying the penetrative act that led to her misery with a fatal penetration of her own.

It's a fascinating blend of the lowbrow and the arthouse that reflects both Edwin's style and his influences. The story is told to us in bits and pieces leading up to the midway point; we are only privy to the parts of each character's story that are required. This results in a fractured timeline that is sometimes a bit dizzying, but never so much that it distracts from the story of this central relationship. In fact, everything goes back to Ajo and Iteung; even when the film appears to be going off on a tangent, it's fairly simple to draw a line back to them, though on the surface it may seem unlikely.

The arthouse influence is reinforced by Edwin's choices in the framing of the story as well as the interesting musical choices. Frequent collaborator Dave Lumenta (*Postcards from the Zoo, Possessive*) returns with a fascinating mix of musical styles that sounds absurd without the proper context but bridges the span between low and highbrow art effortlessly. Mixing pulpy synth music and jauntier jazz guitar sounds like an odd combination but fits the tone perfectly. Lumenta's score adds an essential layer to what is already a complex film by referencing the type of music we might know from 80s action and horror films while also reminding us that this film is so much more than it seems on the surface.

Further reminders of the cultural references in the film are everywhere, as Edwin uses the hand-painted truck art to convey not only the feeling of the era, but also **the tone of the film**. At several points the artwork becomes animate, as if to play Greek chorus for the audience – an unexpected and whimsical stylistic choice that occasionally provides distraction from some of the heavier themes.

As Indonesian genre cinema has begun gaining ground in the last fifteen years, with the work of Timo Tjahjanto and Kimo Stamboel leading the charge in more hardcore action and horror and Joko Anwar mixing horror with political and social commentary, it is fascinating to hear another voice telling the story of this nation. Edwin is no stranger to the film world, but *Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* is a new type of project from him, and it proves that he could take on the genre world if he so chooses. I certainly hope to see more like this from him, because it has been a delight digging into this complex work and I want more.

Josh Hurtado is a programming consultant with Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas and a film critic with Screen Anarchy and the Austin Chronicle.







ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound. The High Definition master was provided by The Match Factory.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
Technical Assistant **James Pearcey**
QC **Aidan Doyle**
Production Coordinator **Leila El-Khalifi Hall**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Disc Mastering / Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Edwin, Thania Dimitrakopoulou, Josh Hurtado, Irin Junirman,
Jenna Roberts, Meiske Taurisia





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