

DEBORAH GABINETTI  
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## WAKING UP TO KINGFISHERS

**D**EBORAH Gabinetti is quick, gregarious, and emotive—an immediate presence as soon as she enters a room. Yet she gives the impression of someone who is used to listening and observing. She will stop in the middle of a story to check your reaction, is not afraid to let pauses linger, tilts her head at you when curious to know what your take is on a situation and persists until she receives an answer.

When *Tempo* called Balinale’s hotline to inquire about the festival, it was Gabinetti who answered the call. “This is Deborah. The director of the festival. Yes, I’m picking up calls,” she said, laughing heartily, when asked who was on the other end of the line.

Gabinetti grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts, and took courses in theater production at the New School in New York City. “I was a struggling actress, I guess,” she said when asked about her time in New York, adding that she was lucky she found out early on what her real gift was: finding talent.

She became a casting director in New York city before she first came to Jakarta in 1993, where she was the marketing manager for Indovision from 1994 to 1997.

After Gabinetti moved to Bali in 1998, a couple of production companies she had worked with contacted her to ask about shooting a film in Bali. The process was complicated at the time, she said, “But I quickly realized that if I wanted to make this my home and be respected in the community as a professional, I had to do things the proper way and the legal way and all of that.”

The ‘pages and pages’ of regulations, which Gabinetti described with broad hand gestures as if playing an accordion, were ‘chopped down’ to just seven bullet points by the provincial government, which could then be used by production companies interested in shooting films in

Bali as a guideline for producing the necessary documents.

Deborah was set up in one of the governor’s offices in Renon for one and a half years until the Bali Film Center’s office was endorsed by the government in 2002. “For about a year and a half I was there, just establishing relationships,” she said.

Since then the Bali Film Center has helped facilitate the filming of several big productions: Ryan Murphy’s *Eat, Pray, Love* and Oliver Stone’s *Savages*. According to Gabinetti, Mount Rinjani in Lombok was even recently considered for the *War for the Planet of the Apes*, an upcoming installment in the *Planet of the Apes* franchise, scheduled for release in 2017. Her disappointment as she relayed the story was quite obvious and one cannot help thinking that Lombok would have certainly benefitted from the exposure, considering the slump Lombok has not quite overcome since the 2000 riots.

Gabinetti had been in communication with Mary McLaglen, the film’s executive producer, and the permits and visas were ready, she said, but incentives could not be secured for the 21st Century Fox, who would have gone over-budget had they completed the shoot in Indonesia. The disappointment, for a go-getter such as Gabinetti—she actively pursued the filming of *Eat, Pray, Love* in Bali when Plan B Entertainment was considering other potential locations—is not surprising.

When asked how the government can help support the Bali Film Center in making Indonesia more inviting to foreign filmmakers, she said, “This is a business that works on a certain schedule and a budget, within that schedule. So decisions have to be made, timely decisions. Certain transparency is another thing. Communication, I suppose. Being able to give reasons behind the decisions that are made, with clarity.”

When asked about her passion for bringing film productions into Indonesia, she



said, “It’s about the potential that Indonesia has as a film destination, so it’s not just about Bali. Bali certainly has a lot to offer, but Indonesia in general is just so diverse and so vast, it can actually mimic any location. [...] I’m hoping that we will create greater awareness of Indonesia—without offering any kind of incentives at this stage.”

Gabinetti believes that Indonesia holds a certain kind of magic, a unique energy. Michael Rowe—who won Camera d’Or for best first-time feature film director at the Cannes Film Festival for *Leap Year* and the Venice Days award for his latest, *Early Winter*—and Academy Award winner Christopher Hampton, have both said that they have “written more in one day in Bali than anywhere else in the world,” said Gabinetti.

“It’s that magic. It’s what we’re trying to say to filmmakers. It’s just being here. It’s the energy. [...] I know that when we get them here, we’ll get them hooked in some



way, whether it's the story idea, talent, location, or creating the next film that they're going to shoot somewhere else."

The most rewarding part of the festival, Gabinetti said, was the Children's Charity Program. The first year the program was held in a cinema was in 2008. Didi Petet, who was a guest at the festival, asked around 200 children from orphanages present in the theater how many of them had not been in a *bioskop* (movie theater). Gabinetti said she initially thought it was a silly question to ask, but to her surprise 99 percent of the children raised their hands.

"I had no idea they had never experienced cinema. And the lights went out and you could feel the fear in the room. And the screen came alight and you could feel this energy and all of them started to lean forward. And I guess it was one of the most rewarding moments in my life, so I thought, we could keep doing this."

Gabinetti said the festival, apart from inviting orphanages and schools for their children's program, has always worked with the local *banjar* wherever the festival took place. Dancers from Banjar Segara, where the festival's Lippo Mall venue is situated, performed on opening day. "We gave them a number of tickets to participate not only in the film screenings but also in the workshops and seminars. So we make sure that we involve the community as much as we can."

She knew almost right away when she came to Indonesia that the country would be her home. "There's a history," she said rather evasively, before changing the subject. "It was the Indonesians who became my very first friends." Including, she said, Inneke Indriyani, the festival's advisor and the co-founder of the Bali Taksu Indonesia Foundation along with Gabinetti and Christine Hakim.

But even when Gabinetti lived in Jakarta, she would always go to Sanur. "I just feel that it's my home. There's a sense of belonging here." Gabinetti confessed to being very active in the community, taking part in beach clean-ups and organizing *layar tancap* (outdoor screenings) on the Mertasari beach.

Sanur, which a lot of the younger tourists seem to not particularly care for, does seem to attract those who enjoy quiet, a town for introverts. "Snore, as we call it," Gabinetti says.

An early riser, she wakes up at five in the morning. "I do my yoga practice, but honestly, it's the kingfishers. I look for that. That's my call to prayer." The tiny birds, which were twittering as we spoke, seem to have found a special morning sanctuary in her swimming pool. "If you go in the pool quietly, they'll even dive in," Gabinetti said. ● KENDISAN KUSUMATMADJA