

# Dance in Malaysia: Major Forces in the Changing Scene

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***The past and present of Malaysia are both represented in the living traditions of its dance culture. Motions and sounds are celebrated by the masses in the traditional forms of folk dance; ritual healings by traditional healers through ritual dance and music; classical dance at royal places; ethnic dance; and archaic and primordial dances of the Orang Asli (the aborigines of peninsula Malaysia). Mohd Anis Md Nor, Associate Professor in Dance and Music at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, looks at the contemporary dance scene in his country.***

**T**he cultures of the seafaring maritime Malays who had earlier inhabited the coastal and riverine settlements, following the migration of the proto-Malays and the *Orang Asli* (aborigines), synthesized with Indic culture from the Indian sub-continent during the formation of Indianised nation states in Southeast Asia. Indigenous cultures of Peninsula Malaysia and East Malaysia were further influenced by the Persians, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English, Indians and Chinese from the fourteenth to the twentieth century. The ethnic composition of Malaysians, with their diverse cultural backgrounds and histories, has produced a



*Lena Ang Swee Lin in "Beauty Maker"*

convergence of traditions in its contemporary national culture and aspirations.

The complexity of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society and its richness of vast and expensive influences from civilizations of the past and present are revealed in the multitude of dance genres. There are, however, significant differences in the dance forms of West Malaysia and East Malaysia.

Dance traditions of West Malaysia can be categorically divided into several groups. The *Orang Asli* have distinct dances of their own, and Malay dances, which predominate the lowland and

coastal areas of the peninsula, range from classical, folk to the ritualistic; while, in the contemporary Malaysian dance culture, the influences of the Indian sub-continent and the Nanyang (Overseas) Chinese are discernible.

The East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak (flanking the northern and western portion of the island of Borneo) have colourful dances that reflect the multi-ethnicity of its populations. Sabah and Sarawak have a coastline of about 2,253 km, with rivers longer than those in the Peninsula. A series of mountain ranges and hills criss-cross the interior of Sabah and Sarawak, both covered by tropical rain forest. The alluvial coastal plain lie between the sea and the mountainous interior, and are dotted with riverine towns and villages. This physical landscape of Sabah and Sarawak, and the variety of ethnic communities inhabiting different terrains in both states, has contributed to the rich cultural heritage of Malaysia.

#### **Contemporary Interpretations**

Being a multi-racial and pluralistic society, Malaysia has inherited other Asian dance cultures that came with the arrival of the early Indic and Chinese communities. Although some have remained exclusive traditions of the Chinese and Indians, others have merged into



*Lena Ang Swee Lin in "Skin Trilogy" Art Gallery*

forms which represent the larger contemporary Malaysian society.

Indian classical dances such as the Bharatnatyam, Odissi, and Kuchupuddi have gained new heights and renaissance among contemporary Malaysians. Indian folk traditions such as the stick dance of the Tamil community, the Onam dances of the Malayales, Bangra of the Sikh community, and popular dances copied from Hindu and Tamil movies have caught Malaysians' imagination.

On the other hand, Chinese dances in Malaysia are frequently performed all over the country. Contemporary interpretations of

Chinese dances such as the Fan dance, Lotus dance, Crane dance and Ribbon dance are most popular amongst the multi-racial Malaysian society. As the strongest symbol of Chinese culture, the Lion dance is performed widely during lunar celebrations such as the Chinese New Year festivals. Currently though, a new but dramatic performance of the Dragon dance is making inroads into the Chinese community in Malaysia, replicating similar dance forms performed in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Perhaps this new phenomena will evolve into a new and exciting sincretised version of the Malaysian Dragon dance. Furthermore, contemporary young Malaysians of Chinese descent have fused new and

modern choreographies drawn along the lines of Chinese folk and classical dance genres, creating new identities in re-addressing Chinese cultures within the larger perspectives of Malaysian artistic expressions.

During the decades between the seventies and nineties, an ongoing process of modern dance expressions has been happening. Marion D'Cruz, Ramli Ibrahim, Ghouse Nassaruddin, Francis Teoh, Lee Lee Lan and the late Lari Leong are amongst the established names in the contemporary Malaysian dance scene. The forebearers of Malaysian modern dance choreographers have expanded

to include new and upcoming dancers and choreographers such as Steven Koh, Wong Kit Yaw, Vincent Tan, Mew Chang Tsing, Lena Ang Swee Lin, Aida Redza, Joseph Victor Gonzales, Suhaimi Mägi and Chong Yoon Keong.

Many of the earlier modern Malaysian dances emerged from the eclectic fusion with western contemporary dance techniques such as those of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Alvin Nikolai. Marion D'Cruz fused the Joget Gamelan and Terinai dance techniques with contemporary movements merging into specific styles which have today become more evident in her interpretations of modern Malaysian movements. She is the prime choreographer for the Five Arts Centre set up in 1984. Women and her travail arose as the affecting theme of the narrative works of Marion D' Cruz and her dancers. She builds her dance through experimentation, deconstruction and reconstruction processes in search of contemporary vocabulary. Her search for Asian forms in modern styles are reflected in works such as Sintesis '84, Solo '86, New Direction '88, Sook-Ching, Asian Breeze, Swan Song, Alter Art, Woman at Point Zero, and Let Me Speak - A Dance Concert. Let Me Speak showcased new definitions and boundaries of dance in a form recognized as Marion's own. Carving a woman's self identity and the journey she traced

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became the central theme to her piece *Woman at Point Zero*. Marion also performed collaborative works with innovative visual artists in many of her works.

Ramli Ibrahim inherited rich and powerful expositions in the dances of East and West. Initially trained in the rigours of classical ballet and contemporary dance before he joined the Sydney Dance Company in the 1970s, Ramli's passion to express life in the richness of myths and rituals eventually lead him into classical Indian dances, Odissi and Bharata Natyam.

Today, Ramli is a renowned Odissi dancer and has become an exponent of Bharata Natyam.

Ramli's choreographic foray into the realm of contemporary dance idioms has brought Ramli new expressions linking Indic, Malay and western dance styles. His first contemporary repertoire, *Gerhana I* (1983), was about the tragic heroism of Jebat, the renegade warrior of old Melaka. He collaborated with Valerie Ross, Malaysia's most significant serious composer of avant garde music, to produce *Karma* and *Once Upon A Time*. Nik Mustapha, who is also a well known composer, produced the music for Ramli's *Silat Al-Rahim* while Steve Reich, an American composer, wrote the music for *Transitory States*.

Ramli and Sutra has come a long way to become the most vibrant

and most toured dance company in the country. Ramli also launched Sutra's annual and bi-annual Pesta Sutra Festivals which include *Ready When You Are*, *Up To You*, *Harum* and *Body Moves*. In addition, many young and promising dancers have emerged under Ramli's tutelage. Marvin Khoo, a young dancer of Chinese and Indian parentage, and Gunasegeran, of Indian parentage, are two excellent Malaysian dancers who were trained by Ramli.

The Kwangsi Association is a Malaysian modern dance company with strong Chinese styles. Established in mid 1980s, the Association had strong leaning towards Taiwan's and Hong Kong's dance movements, with major works produced by Lin Hwa-min, a well-known Taiwanese choreographer.

The desire to consciously develop indigenous choreography has compelled local choreographers such as Steven Koh, Wong Kit Yaw, Vincent Tan and Mew Chang Tsing to produce new works based on the traditions of Chinese dance styles. Eventually, the Kwangsi Association opened its doors to transcend their ethnic-oriented boundaries when the group invited choreographers such as Lari Leong, Loh Pit Foong and Marion D'Cruz to produce new works.

Lee Lee Lan and the Kuala Lumpur Dance Theatre (KLDT) is synonymous with ballet and modern dance in Malaysia. KLDT became the outlet for the talents of dancers groomed in the ballet academies, run by Lee

Lee Lan, which catered to suburban and contemporary dances. Naturally, works of ballet teachers and students were used as the focus of KLDT's modern dance pieces.

Lena Ang Swee Lin is another of Malaysia's example of the East-West collages of sentiments with which she chooses to express her avant garde, improvisory dance of Butoh. Lena Ang was trained in modern dance, ballet and classical Javanese court dance. She is the only Malaysian modern dancer and choreographer whose choreography reflects her strong background in Javanese court dances while pursuing a contemporary Malaysian expression. The energies in her dances are urban-based, and evoke the primordial expressions of city dwellers. Lena's dances aim to communicate the ironies of life, depicting normal activities within the cosmogony of surrealism. Although she does not intend to recreate Butoh in Malaysia, the inner energies of

her creative work are strongly inclined towards similar "higher state of being" or "awareness" which is sensitive to the Malaysian surroundings and environment. Lena's recent works include *Frame* (1993) for International Women's Day Celebration, and *Tea for Two* (1993), a comment on pretentious yuppies [young professionals], *Scorpion Orchid* (1994) for the 1994 Singapore International Arts Festival, *Left Over Passage with a life hen for the Body Move Concert*, and *Where is the Dessert?* for an AIDS Awareness Programme.

Aida Redza's combination of Eric Hawkins, Cunningham and Limon techniques within the sublime motion of local forms has produced yet another champion in the modern Malaysian dance scene. She was involved in Pusat Seni Dance Troupe (of Universiti Sains Malaysia)'s productions of *Jambatan*, *Degup Jantung* and *Nanamun Mantanai* from 1989

to 1990 before joining the People's Association Dance Company of Singapore from 1990 to 1991. Aida, a former dancer of the Gamble Van Dyke Dance Company, and Blue Skidd Dance Company, also toured the east coast of America and Europe before returning to Malaysia in 1994. As a result, her new work is a spectrum of her adventures in Malaysia, Singapore and the United States. Her recent choreographies such as *Confrontation* and *Mengapai Kekal* were premiered at the Third Indonesian International Dance Festival in 1994.

In another genre of modern Malaysian dance expression, Azanin Ezane Ahmad is the only artist who adapts the dramaturgy or contemporary dance drama by using stories from local legends as her subjects. Azanin has developed her own dance styles in narrating Malay drama with the vocabulary of the Makyong dance tradition. Her use of Wayang Kulit (shadow puppets) and Makyong music in her Suasana dance company's lavish dance dramas has created neo-classical nuances in her choreographies. *Dayang Sari* (1978) was Azanin's first major production, that was followed by the first of many other exemplary works such as *Jentayu* (1980), *Puteri Sa'dong* (1981), *Cempaka Emas* (1984), *Kunang-Kunang and Keris*. The initial productions were richly enhanced by the expert help of the late Ismail Bakti, a master dancer, musician, craftsman and keeper of court etiquette. Azanin's son, Tharuwat Ismail Bakti was the lead male dancer who helped in



artistic production. Another lead male dancer who danced with Ezanin after Tharuwat Ismail Bakti was Razali Osman. This was followed by Nik Malik. Tharuwat Ismail Bakti, Razali Osman, Nik Malik and Roslan Hussin, who danced in the roles of warriors and mythical characters for Suasana, developed on their own, strong male dance styles. Today, Azanin stands as one of the leading contemporary choreographer who creates dances from the wealth of Malay cultural heritage.

The Indian classical dances of Bharata Natyam, Odissi, and Kathak are lengthy dance dramas with other Indian folk dances, often performed with the accompaniment of North Indian and Karnatic music in contemporary styles by the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA). Established in 1981 by Swami Shantanand and his devotees Sivadas, Vatsala Sivadas, Gopal Shetty and Radha Shetty, TFA has grown from the inspired beginnings of teaching the origins of the Divine through music, art and dance into a full-fledged performing arts centre in Malaysia. The annual week-long Festival of Arts present dance and music which are choreographed and directed by TFA's teachers and students. New interpretations are being created by TFA in the major production of the Chinese story of Lady White Snake and the Indian epic of Ramayana. With the creation of new dance forms from the Indic, Malay and Chinese dance traditions, TFA has come to the forefront of Malaysian performing arts.

There are many more dancers and choreographers who are redefining the realm of modern dance in Malaysia. Chong Yoon Keong from Melaka is known for his lyrical choreography of Chinese modern dances while Suhaimi Magi from Sabah promotes indigenous dance styles from his native land through contemporary expressions.

The Malaysian dance world has never been as promising and exuberant as it is today. The successful Tari '94 International Dance Conference held in Kuala Lumpur during 1994 revealed the forging of new dance energies and relationships amongst the local choreographers and dancers. Many more scenarios will emerge as Malaysia's artistic talents take to the stage, and more esotericism will be incorporated into the modern dance in Malaysia.

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*"Archives and Fields: A Discourse in Dance History in Malaysia," and "Dance Research in Malaysia: Old and New Interpretations," The Challenge and Message in Dance. Seoul: Korea International Dance Event, 1995.*

*"Dance" Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.*

*Zapin: Folk Dance of the Malay World. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993.*

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