

# Corporate Sponsorship or Corporate Hospitality for Performing Arts in Malaysia?

***Performing arts have a role in the private sector, and vice-versa. Zulkifli Mohamad gives his perspectives***

## Introduction

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism is responsible for the preservation, development and promotion of arts, culture and tourism in the country - the only one in South East Asia that lumps arts and culture with tourism (in most South East Asian countries, arts and culture are combined with education to ensure the preservation, development and promotion of their arts and culture, even though the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism recently initiated a new department, Culture Tourism to incorporate monuments and historical sites into plans and fixtures for tourism).

Tourism Malaysia, under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, has been using dance and other performing arts to attract foreigners to visit Malaysia. Towards this end the National Cultural Complex ('Kompleks Budaya Negara'), which was established in 1970 under the same ministry, have been organising performances of traditional arts, mostly folk dances. As a further step towards a National Theatre, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism established in 1994 the National Arts Academy, and in the same year, honoured shadow puppeteer (*Dalang Wayang Kulit*) Hamzah Awang Amat with the National Artist Award. The academy covers the performing arts of dance, music, drama and creative writing.



Classical performing arts such as *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppetry) and *Mak Yong* (Kelantan Musical Theatre) did not receive enough attention to be included as a National Culture component by the National Arts Council in 1970 due to the use of the heavy Kelantan dialect. Both classical art forms were also perceived and considered to be too rural. Moreover, the state government of Kelantan, ruled by the Malaysian Islamic Party, does not recognise *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Yong*. Since the late 1960s, *Wayang Kulit* has been banned in Kelantan because of the animistic rituals involved in the performance, as well as its Hindu-based Ramayana epic. *Mak Yong*, as were other dance performances, has been banned because it included women on stage. These performing art forms have attracted many scholars, domestically and abroad, including Prof. William Malm and Prof.

Amin Sweeney from American universities. The late Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard had also extensively researched on both art forms in the 1960s. Local scholars like Ghulam Sarwar and Mohd. Ghouse Nasaruddin continued their research in the same area in the 1970s.

Apart from the above researches, nothing significant has been contributed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, compared to Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia, where



classical arts continue to prosper. *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit* enjoyed a short stint of revival in national television programmes during the 1970s but failed to receive adequate sponsorship to keep the show running. Despite the bans, both art forms continue to struggle for survival in the villages of Kelantan, with many of its master practitioners having passed away along with their skills; and some having changed professions due to the lack of support from both the public and government.

**Suasana Dance Company**

Upon their return from Australia, Azanin Dato' Ahmad, dancer-choreographer, and Prof. Shahril Talib, South East Asian Historian, established the Suasana Dance Company in Kuala Lumpur as a dance theatre company in 1978. They were keen on preserving, developing and promoting the dying art forms of Malay classical dance and theatre,

and were partly inspired by the researches of William Malm, Amin Sweeney and Mubin Sheppard. Suasana, which means atmosphere, first performed in Melbourne in the mid 1970s; a dance troupe led by Dr. Zamin Haroon (Chandrabhanu) promoted a new Malay dance theatre using traditional Malay dance genres.

Today, Suasana is known in Malaysia for its neo-classical Malay dance theatre, and has produced more than ten full-length productions, including 'Ramayana: Seri Rama - Siti Dewi', which was perhaps the first *Ramayana* dance drama in Malaysia. Its version of the *Ramayana*, called '*Seri Rama - Siti Dewi*', premiered in San Francisco and Los Angeles in 1988 in promoting tourism under the direction of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism. Azanin drew dance vocabularies from *Mak yong*, *Asyik*, *Joget Gamelan*, *Terinai* and *Silat* while combining musical scores from *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Yong* theatre. She selected musicians from various groups in Kelantan to form the Suasana Music Ensemble for performances in Kuala Lumpur and abroad.

Over the years, Suasana has been invited to various international arts festivals, including the Edinburgh Arts Festival, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Singapore Arts Festival, Tokyo International Theatre Festival, London 1<sup>st</sup> International Theatre Festival, Berlin Arts Festival, Perth's Asia Pacific Festival, etc.. In conjunction with Malaysia Airline System (MAS)'s Inaugural Flight from Kuala Lumpur to New York on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1998, Suasana were selected by MAS to present a thirty-minute cultural performance (alongside a fashion show by Yeohli, a Malaysian Chinese designer based in New York).

MAS Executive Chairman hosted the occasion for 300 special guests, including mayors of New York and New Jersey. Suasana, with its twenty years of reputation and excellence, was an obvious choice to provide MAS the needed authenticity and

sophistication with a performance entitled *Rhythms in Traditions*. Although it was not the first time MAS had Suasana under its wing, it was certainly the first for corporate hospitality as opposed to corporate sponsorship. Corporate Hospitality is a practice by which corporations chose certain productions of performing arts to entertain their clients. The production could either be commissioned work or ready products - with changes, if need be - suitable to the liking of the corporation. Corporate sponsorship refers to the case when profits (made by the corporation that sponsor the selected production) are channelled back to the community and society. In the official eyes of the country, Suasana is perceived as "appropriate" to represent aspects of Malaysian culture to New Yorkers in the theatre-land of America. This is the second time that Suasana had been chosen to represent Malaysia to promote tourism. (The first time was in 1988 for the San Francisco tourism promotion). The difference on this occasion was that Suasana had been asked to incorporate various dance elements such as Indian and Chinese, as well as folk dance, in a repertoire similar to those produced by Tourism Malaysia (co-sponsor for the inauguration).

### Rhythm in Traditions

Known for its neo-classical dance theatre, Suasana has been challenged by these two corporations, MAS and Tourism Malaysia, to include folk and other ethnic dances, something normally performed by Kompleks Budaya Negara, and which Tourism Malaysia would be familiar with. Suasana, as a private company saw these challenges as opportunities, firstly to help the company survive during the current economic crisis; secondly to expand the company's repertoire. If not for these reasons, these two corporations should respect the company's repertoire and identity.

In the past, Suasana had incorporated dance influences from other genres such as the dance of 'Puteri China' (Chinese princess) *Jentayu* production, *the King of Siam* in 'Puteri Sa'adong', *Hang Li Poh*, the Chinese princess, and Raden Galoh, the Javanese princess in '*Kunang-Kunang Gunung Ledang* (Fireflies of Mount Ophir)', but

they were mostly derived from Malay history, legends and tales, and characters that are narrated in Malay literature.

*Rhythms in Traditions* marked another cornerstone for Suasana. Azanin Ahmad, choreographer-dancer-director of the centre, was concerned with the concepts of multi-culture and diversity, and the unification of the traditional and contemporary in dance performance. Two young choreographer-dancers, Guna Segaran from Khazana Productions, and Mew Chang Tsing from River Grass Dance Theatre, were invited to work on the project. They were both trained in Malay dance, and were therefore no strangers to the scene.

The performance at New York's Waldorf Astoria opened with the silat dance, performed by Roslan Hussein, and followed by Silat trio. The third dance piece '*Malacca*', was a solo dance performed by Azanin Ahmad. It signified the grandeur of



the Malay court of Malacca in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with its neo-classical dance style fused by the classical music of *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* of Kelantan. The fourth item, Kipas (fan dance), presented three court maidens who danced, holding fans which were not only regarded as part of their costumes but also as their weapons. The dance carried a sense of the gracefulness of the Malay court ladies who were able to transform into '*Sri Kandi*' warrior women when confronted by the enemies. It also revealed the richness of the Malay world that incorporates the ethnic dances of the Javanese, Bugis and Malays. All of these dances were

excerpts from Suasana's latest production, *Tun Fatimah* dance drama.

The complexity of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society and its wealth of vast and glorious influences from civilisations of the past and present are revealed in a multitude of dance genres. Being a multi-racial and pluralistic society, Malaysia has inherited other Asian dance cultures that came with the arrival of Indic and Chinese communities. *Bharatha Natyam* dance, for example, is a well-known classical Indian dance which was formerly presented in temple ceremonies but later merged into contemporary Malaysian dance.

A *Bharatha Natyam* welcome dance was presented to depict the devotions and love between two people; followed by the sixth piece, 'Sword Dance of Princess Hang Li Poh' evoked the princess's feelings when she travelled from China, accompanied by Admiral Cheng Ho, to marry the Sultan of Malacca in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The final dance, 'Festival', combined Malay folk dance with contemporary movements drawn from Indian, Chinese and Western influences in a spirit of togetherness and harmony. The dance, colourful with graceful costumes, was upbeat with fast rhythms and movements symbolising contemporary life in Malaysia.

### Malaysian Culture

As far as MAS's and Tourism Malaysia's intentions are concerned, '*Rhythms in Traditions*' has certainly left its mark, but perhaps they should also be aware of the problems affecting arts and culture in Malaysia, where the classical and traditional are neglected even by private companies such as Suasana, which may find it no longer tenable or



viable for economic survival. The Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Education, MAS and many other national corporations have the power and capability to do something about the situation. Promotion of Malaysia and its arts and culture are meaningless without real preservation and development; it is an illusion that tourism is enough to promote local culture. Institutions and organisations must regard traditional arts and culture and social elements that consolidate identity and national dignity as assets that need special attention. Arts and culture should not remain as a marketing tool and promotion of corporate hospitality but require public and corporate support and sponsorship.

### References

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**Zulkifli Mohamad, performing arts specialist, participated in the dance performance in New York which Suasana Cultural Centre offered on the occasion of MAS's inaugural flight from Kuala Lumpur to New York in April 1998**