

The Making, Identity and Patronage of Dance in Malaysia

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Ramli Ibrahim, a leading dancer and choreographer of his generation in Malaysia, has drawn enthusiastic reviews wherever he performs, be it London, New York, Madras, Singapore or Australia. His mastery of Ballet, Modern dance and Indian Classical Dance - three very diverse dance forms - makes him a rare dancer. He was once a member of the prestigious Sydney Dance Company, with which he parted in 1982 when he relocated to India to further his study of Indian Classical dance. In the past 15 years, Ramli has established himself as a leading choreographer in Malaysia. Through Sutra Dance Company, the group he founded in 1983, he has made important contributions to the development of contemporary Malaysian dance. Ramli has also worked with many Malaysian artists in various collaborations (with theatre, visual arts, literary arts, traditional and contemporary musicians)

In 1986 he premiered 'Kalau Kau Mahu' (If You Want), a triple bill of 'Gerhana' (Eclipse), 'Sutrarasa' and 'Baris' (Line). The three pieces of works had been performed separately in 1983 and 1984 and underwent changes prior to 1986 when they were combined into one programme. This production perhaps marks the beginning of Ramli's particular style of contemporary Malaysian dance which draws on both Malay issues and his diverse dance experience. **Gerhana** deals essentially with Hang Jebat's state of mind in the wake of his rebellion. Jebat was one of the five famous Melakan warriors in the 15th

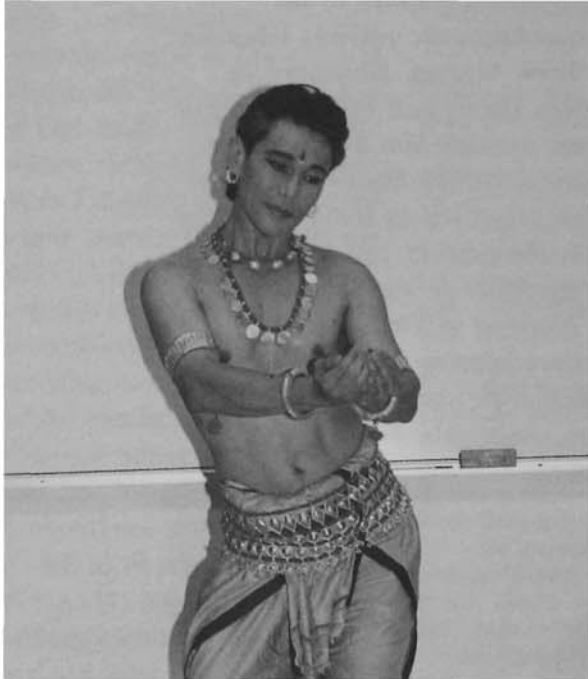


Ramli Ibrahim, dancer and choreographer

century who served in the Melakan court with Hang Tuah. Jebat was considered a rebellious character in Malay History whereas Hang Tuah was seen as obedient and loyal. The execution of Tuah haunted Jebat's dreams and he tried to drown his anger and anguish in desperate acts of debauchery with the palace maidens. **Sutrarasa** was a comment on the human tendency to fantasise and evade reality, an old habit of Malay culture. **Baris** attempted to depict the natural cycle of birth and death, dissolution and rebirth. It was also seen as old order versus new order, evidenced by fossilised traditions in the arts and the

evidence of the survival of old motifs, images and themes in the dance of the new order.

Ramli premiered '**Pandanglah Lihatlah**', his contemporary Malaysian work, in 1983.



Ramli performing 'Odissi', the Temple Dance of Orissa

The title of the work was inspired by the legendary P. Ramlee, a Malaysian composer, film director, singer, musician and actor. This work was followed by the traditional works of Gerhana in 1983, Sutrarasa in 1984, Three Sisters in 1984, Baris in 1984, and Citarasa and Pesta in 1986. In most of his contemporary works Ramli combines ballet and traditional dances. He has used catchy titles such as Pandanglah Lihatlah (Turn Here Look Here) and Kalau Kau Mahu (If You Want) for his productions to attract people to his dance performances because dance, in the eighties, lacked the audience that theatre commanded in Kuala Lumpur.

One of the reasons that dance has lagged behind drama in Malaysia, says Ramli, is that

dance is not fortified by literature. **Malay dance has not "come of age,"** he says, "because no one is writing about it in an intelligent manner." He adds that choreography in Malaysia does not receive the attention it deserves. The audience sees the performer as important without thinking of the person conceptualising the work. In Ramli's view, performers just perform the work, but don't think about it. In this sense, he suggests that practitioners and scholars should have more dialogue to improve the process. Although dance has not progressed at the same rate as drama, Ramli believes that it is more original.

Ramli feels that "The Malay theatre has been weakened by **over spoon-feeding by the Malaysian Government**", and that Panggung Negara (The National Theatre), which produces its own productions, leaves little money to sponsor smaller companies. He believes that the Arts council should not produce their own work because they have a vested interest in it. They do not want to give money to smaller companies, he says, because they want to produce lavish productions. **Cultural colonialism** appears to be present here as sponsorship is obtained from various embassies in Malaysia to produce shows, such as 'South Pacific', to promote an exotic third world image, a trend seen to a larger extent in the 60's and 70's. In the introduction to Sutra's Mid Year Dance Encounters (June 1994), Ramli writes that "Sutra is keen to diminish the false barrier of ethnicity, genre, and status that still polarises and shackles theatre in Malaysia."

This problem of government sponsorship for the arts has long plagued Ramli. He wrote an article in a local magazine that discussed the formation of a Malaysian Arts Council (Malaysia currently has no such body) to promote but not produce Malaysian art so as to avoid the problems inherent in Panggung

Negara. The Sutra Festival is a response to this lack of funding. Ramli feels that the Malay audience is ready for a festival that is not "another food festival". As for the Kuala Lumpur city council, Ramli charges they have no serious mission of culture. "Their vision only goes up the point of growing trees," he says. When asked by the Men's Review (July 1996) **why public support for the arts is so lax**, Ramli replied, "Please address that question to the masses of young people shopping at Lot 10 (one of the exclusive shopping complexes in Kuala Lumpur) and spending their money in bars and cafes. How do they wish to define themselves? We should be defined by our art, culture and traditions, not by our current gauges of identity. "History and traditions represent an unshakable base for the future. There is ... little public support, let alone support [and] firm commitment from the Government to recognise that it is crucial to appreciate, elevate and preserve our cultural traditions (such as saving Mak Yong and Manora). There is a sense of urgency, of time quickly slipping by. What will happen to our heritage everytime a traditional dancer or musician or puppeteer dies?

History is lost. Reviving ancient art forms is about saving an important part of one's heritage. It is who you are." With the rapid economic development in

Malaysia, Ramli is concerned that the arts and culture may be left behind. In an article written in August, 1997, Ramli writes with considerable unease about the **"rapid physical development" in Malaysia**, a growth, he says, that has come about at the "expense of its capacity to respond to its deeper emotions and its spiritual development." That said, Ramli does not promote a constantly backwards-looking attitude towards the arts. Rather, a **"new aesthetic"** that reflects both the contemporary and traditional aspects of Malay society.



Indian classical dance demonstration at SPAFA Centre

In the past 15 years, Ramli's focus has primarily favoured his Indian work over his contemporary work, due to the readiness of the Kuala Lumpur audience and Indian community to accept his particular style of Indian Classical Dance. In addition, Indian Classical Dance can command a strong international audience. He has, however, met minor resistance from some circles because he is a **Malay man performing Indian dance** which has traditionally been performed by Indians.



Although Ramli's company maintains the position as the most high-profiled

company in Malaysia, it holds this position without any sponsorship. "Indians won't sponsor me and Malaysians won't touch me," he says, "my position is

very iconoclastic. I smash their icons. They say only Indians can do Indian work. I say Indian Classical Dance is a very Malaysian experience.” Even without sponsorship, Ramli manages to compete with full-time, fully-funded international dancers. He reveals that this absence of sponsorship, albeit certainly a weakness, grants him the advantage of independence. Furthermore, as a solo dancer, Ramli’s production costs are much lower than the average company.

Ramli maintains that his Indian work is quite innovative, even though it stems from a very old philosophical tradition. Most of the repertoires we see within the medium, says Ramli, have been created in the last 40 years. “What is innovative is the way I present it,” he says, “instead of demystifying the work, make it more mystifying.” He feels that due to this innovation, **Indian Classical Dance deserves the classification of Modern Dance.** “One ought to realise,” he says, “that there is a way of looking at Indian Classical Dance that has nothing to do with the West. Modern Dance can have its point of reference anywhere in the world.”



“My position is very iconoclastic. I smash their icons” - Ramli

In creating ‘Aku’ (Me), Sutra’s major contemporary dance production in 1996 about man and his alter ego (“He enmeshes the complicated spiral guilt, corruption, sexuality and power”), Ramli speaks of his inspiration: **“changes in Malaysian society provide the fodder for his inquiring mind.** Kuala Lumpur is a constant construction site. More interestingly, it is a reflection of the perennial construction site of our minds. In our society, we are in the process of making lots of decisions. Our society today is filled with people who have all it takes to make important and fundamental changes, but

power changes their personal choices, and everything is their grab.” After *Aku*, Ramli worked with Denisa Reyes, Filipino choreographer, for a Southeast Asian collaborative work called **‘Unravelling the Maya’**, and recently, **‘Realising Rama’**, the modern interpretation of the ancient epic Ramayana.