

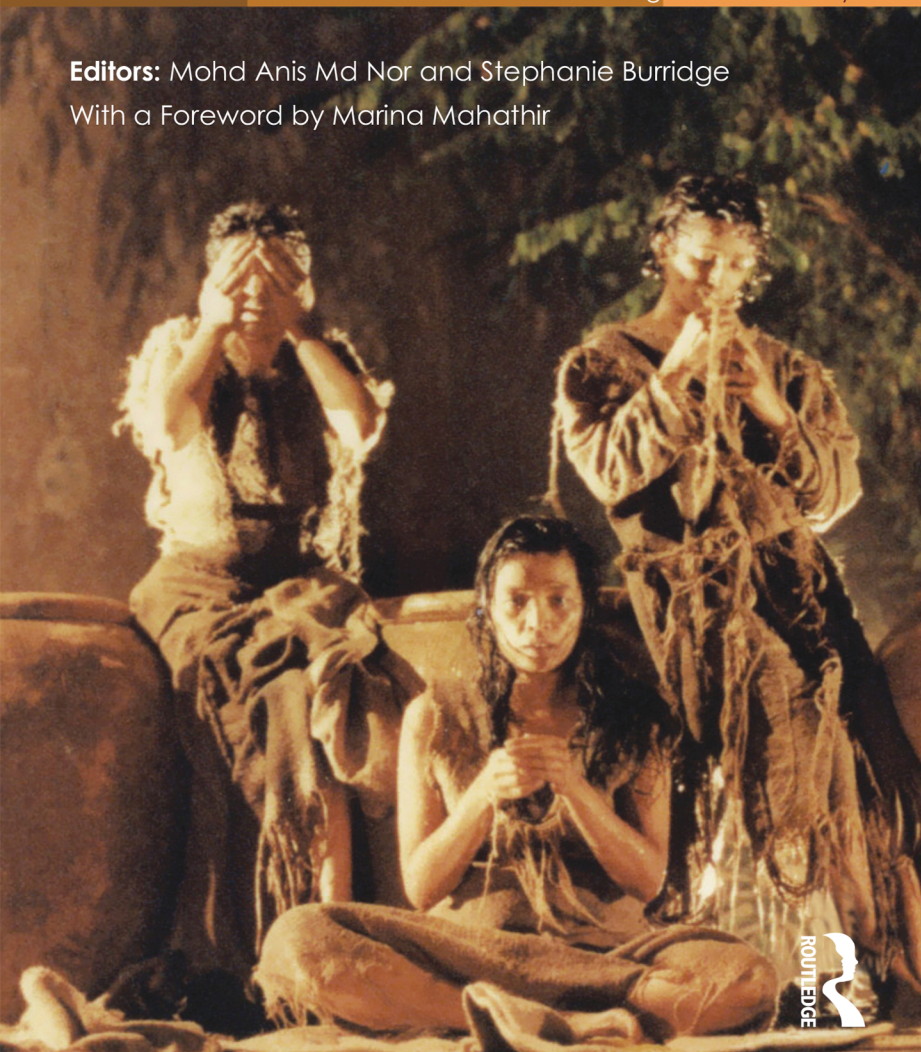
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**CELEBRATING DANCE** IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC  
Series Editor: Stephanie Burridge

# SHARING IDENTITIES

Celebrating Dance in Malaysia

**Editors:** Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burridge  
With a Foreword by Marina Mahathir



ROUTLEDGE

## ***Sharing Identities***

# **Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific**

Series Editor: **Stephanie Burridge**

*Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* is a series that presents the views of eminent scholars, journalists and commentators alongside the voices of a new generation of choreographers working from tradition to create new forms of expression in contemporary dance. It documents and celebrates these artistic journeys that work within the framework of rich and complex cultural heritages. Future titles in this series include Australia, Taiwan, New Zealand and the Pacific. The series is published by Routledge in India and supported by the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific.

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***Sharing Identities***  
**Celebrating Dance in Malaysia**

**Editors**

Mohd Anis Md Nor  
Stephanie Burridge

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## Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Marina Mahathir	ix
<i>Preface</i> by Stephanie Burridge	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
Introduction	xxi
<i>Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burridge</i>	
1. <i>Joget Gamelan: The Royal Dance of the Pahang and Terengganu Courts</i>	1
<i>Marion D'Cruz</i>	
2. <i>Asyik Dance: From Kelantanese Palace to a National Heritage</i>	24
<i>Mohamed Tharuvatt Ismail Bakti and Mohd Anis Md Nor</i>	
3. <i>Eclecticism and Syncretic Traditions: The Making of Malay Folk Dance</i>	37
<i>Mohd Anis Md Nor</i>	
4. <i>Five-Six-Seven-Eight! . . . Tracing the Malaysian Roots of Jazz Dance</i>	56
<i>Revathi Murugappan</i>	
5. <i>Transnationalism among Malaysian Contemporary Dance Choreographers</i>	72
<i>Bilqis Hijjas</i>	
6. <i>From Ballet to Modern Dance: Tracing Modernity in Malaysian Dance</i>	92
<i>Joseph Gonzales</i>	

7. The Making of Malaysian Contemporary Dance by Chinese Choreographers and Dancers <i>Leng Poh Gee</i>	111
8. <i>Bharatanatyam</i> in Malaysia <i>Premalatha Thiagarajan</i>	130
9. Dancing the Strong Woman: Celebrating Women, Feminism and Contemporary Dance in Malaysia <i>Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer</i>	148
10. Dance and Ritual in Sabah <i>Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan</i>	166
11. Dancing with the Pen <i>Su-Ling Choy</i>	187
Artist Voices and Biographies Curated by <i>Joseph Gonzales</i>	207
Aida Redza, Anthony Meh, Aris Kadir, Chen Ing Kuan, Dhanya Thurairajah, Farah Sulaiman, Gan Chih Pei, January Low, Jay Jen Loo, Joseph Gonzales, Lee Lee Lan, Lee Swee Keong, Low Ming Yam, Marion D'Cruz, Mavin Khoo, Michael Xavier Voon, Ramli Ali, Ramli Ibrahim, Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi, Steve Goh, Suhaili Ahmad Kamil, Suhaimi Magi, Umesh Shetty, Vincent Tan Lian Ho, Wong Fook Choon, Wong Kit Yaw	
<i>Index</i>	273

The strategic negotiation of the various social, economic and political pressures . . . illustrates the transnationalist trend which increasingly marks the work of contemporary choreographers from Malaysia.

— *Bilqis Hijjas*

Malay classical dance is extremely difficult to master. The actual physical movements are not difficult, but the in-depth *rasa* is extremely difficult to embody . . . where the physical and the ethereal converge.

— *Marion D'Cruz*

I would like Indian classical dance to appeal to the urban youth. I would like classical dance forms to be relatable, approachable and easy to watch and to understand. That's why I tried out playing with the expressive aspect of Indian classical dance, because *rasa* is universal.

— *January Low*

I believe that there is a way of dancing and choreographing that is the 'Malaysian style'. This can possibly be seen as the new forms that are emerging from Malaysia are different from the rest of the world.

— *Jay Jen Loo*

My choreography begins with a spark, an idea, or an image and then involves an intense period of improvisation followed by careful structuring . . . The most vital is to realize my vision, impact the audience and create work about what matters to me, as an artist and citizen of this country.

— *Joseph Gonzales*



I believe that a student must be an empty vessel into which knowledge is poured every day. The spirit of humility will encourage learning to all levels and in every situation. I believe that dance is for all the community. Dance is for everybody.

— *Vincent Tan Lian Ho*

Dance is an expression of the soul through the mind and body. It is important for dancer/choreographer to be able to express his feelings through dance — to bare one's soul through the choreography so that it resonates with the audience.

— *Umesh Shetty*

All my works are rooted in (these) traditions but I do not think that they are bound by these traditions or that this limits my artistic choices. In fact, I find it extremely exciting to explore the possibilities of contemporary interpretations in choreography using traditional dance material . . .

— *Suhaimi Magi*

This reversal of conventional ideas and performer–audience relationship has made me brave and keeps me exploring non-conventional spaces. I explore space with my dancers like taking them out to the open fields or streets, barefoot in the tropical heat to see how it influences their movements.

— *Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi*

## ***Foreword***

Marina Mahathir

In these fractious times, Malaysians often look back in nostalgia at the ‘good old days’ when we all got along better. And while it is comforting to romanticize that past, on culture I have different memories.

I went to a convent school and was taught by both lay teachers and nuns. It was a good school in many ways and I treasure my years, from kindergarten all the way up to Form 3, there. But because in my small town Muslim parents were wary of sending their daughters to a Catholic school, I was one of the very few Malay girls there.

This did not bother me at all until I went to boarding school where I found myself surrounded by only Malay girls. Whatever one thinks of our mono-racial boarding schools, in the culture department I had a shock. Back in convent school, the only dance I ever learnt was ‘folk dance’. This was essentially Western in nature, although of indeterminate origin. Once, for a public sports function, we performed a ‘can-can’ dance which required us to wear blue satin bloomers.

It was only when I went to boarding school that I learnt any Malay dances at all. To me, this was a revelation. How could I have been kept away from my own dance culture, even the simplest *Joget*? At that school, I learnt many different forms of Malay dance and, for the first time, felt some connection to my own culture. And instead of being an onerous thing, my culture was, in fact, fun.

Today, I wonder if the good old days were as good as we remembered them when our own culture was so absent from

our education, even if it was good in all other aspects. How could we live in Asia, especially in a multicultural one like ours, and have so little contact with our own myriad cultures?

And indeed, Malaysia has so much to offer to the dance world. From the gentle swayings and graceful fingers of the *Mak Yong* to the intricate gestures and expressions of the *Bharatanatyam* to the folk dances of Sabah and Sarawak, we have dances that are varied, intricate and colourful. But how little we know about them, and therefore how little the rest of the world knows about them too!

Perhaps the greatest victim of Malaysian dance as it is today is authenticity. Today we regularly see 'Malaysian' dances on TV or at festivals, whose origins are blended so much they are blurred. Tourists may applaud the colour and liveliness but if they happened to ask what exactly these dances represent, we may be hard put to tell them.

Sure, there are dances that look vaguely Malay, Indian, Chinese, or Kadazan but despite the differences in their costumes, they dance the same steps. And what was once slow and intricate becomes now hurried and simplified. Performances, or 'shows' as we like to call them, now recall Las Vegas, with as much tinsel and glitter.

We no longer need the school I went to to separate us from our cultures; the Ministry of Culture does it for us.

Today for any child to learn anything of our own cultural dances, parents would have to take the responsibility to find ways to teach them. But it takes parents who are also aware of their own cultures and who see the need to encourage and promote dance, indeed any of the arts, in every way. Today children do want to dance and sing, but their idols are Lady Ga-Ga and Justin Bieber. There are videos that allow every little girl from anywhere in the world to learn the steps for the latest Beyonce dance. But videos of Malaysian traditional dances are poorly made and difficult to follow. How do we even begin to compete for attention?

This book is a start. To know the histories of the various dances in Malaysia is essential to create interest in these

dances. And indeed the histories, especially of the various sultans and princesses who have been patrons of these dance arts, are fascinating. But how do we translate these into forms that would attract new and young audiences, essential to their longevity?

There have been attempts to video these dances before but the poor quality does not do much to popularize these dances. A dedicated YouTube channel with professionally filmed dances and good sound quality would attract a better audience.

Then we need to look at the dance interest among the young. We would be mistaken to think that young people are not interested in dance. The numbers of dance groups, especially those who gather informally on city sidewalks on weekends to perform, attest to the enormous interest they have in modern dance forms, as well as to the creativity that young people can bring to them.

What is perhaps missing is the Malaysian-ness of it all. The young may field all their talent and energy dancing on the streets but none of it reflects our own culture. That may be the inevitable effect of globalization but at the same time can also be simply the lack of knowledge about our own dance heritage. How difficult would it be to do a hip-hop version of *Zapin* or *Joget*, if we put our mind to it?

At the same time, while modernization of our dance is something we have to accept, what can we do about the authentic dances of old? Perhaps we should simply present them in their most authentic form. People, especially the young, are rarely moved by the jazzed-up versions served up for tourists. They might even be slightly embarrassed by them. But they may respond to authenticity simply because the real thing always works better.

Recently I was in Kerala, where I went to see a *Kathakali* dance performance. To say it was actually a dance would be an exaggeration but the whole event was a performance. It began with us watching the dancers apply their elaborate make-up and put on their costumes. We sat on chairs surrounding the

dancers as they sat on the floor, applied their make-up and chatted with each other, ignoring us.

Then, after we were ushered into a small cramped theatre, they came onstage to 'perform', with a narrator explaining what every gesture and expression meant. It was supremely interesting and entertaining. We felt that an otherwise impenetrable art form had been decoded for us.

Perhaps this is what we need to do to our dances. Instead of bludgeoning audiences with fast-moving versions of our dances, with no more an explanation than what the dance is about, we should, as the Keralites do, unpack our authentic dances and explain more, rather than less. What could be more interesting than the history of these dances and their accompanying music, and the meanings of particular movements, gestures and steps?

It means that the many dance companies have to do their research and then package it in a way that appeals to both local and foreign audiences. It requires thinking up and planning a strategy for outreach to different audiences, schoolchildren among them. It also requires a commitment to spotting dance and musical talent and nurturing them to continue that heritage.

Today, while we applaud our children when they tap dance to Broadway tunes, we should also blush in shame at the fact that they may go through their entire childhood without learning any dance from their own heritage. Our traditional dance schools should be open to visitors; wouldn't tourists jump at the chance to see a *Bharatanatyam* class at the Temple of Fine Arts or at Sutra in action, rather than seeing some watered-down version at a restaurant stage show?

There was a time when dance festivals featuring traditional dance companies from all over Southeast Asia would be held. These should be revived and subsidized enough so that more people can attend. Perhaps there should be free performances in public places including shopping malls. Certainly they should

go to schools. Free performances are rarely ignored, and if they spark interest in even a few people, that would already be worth the effort.

This book is timely for many reasons. First, it serves to remind the world that, as fast developing as it is, Malaysia does also possess a culture, specifically a dance culture, that goes back a long way into history. Second, it is a diverse dance culture reflecting its diverse population. Third, while some may have been imported from elsewhere through its migrant populations, their long settlement in Malaysia has spawned a new Malaysian-ized form of that heritage. Fourth, Malaysia's dance culture also assimilates and translates into modern forms and idioms. And fifth, as with all cultural fields, while the new is encouraged, there is always the issue of preserving and popularizing the old.

*Sharing Identities* is an apt beginning on that journey.

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*Marina also writes a fortnightly column on social issues in a local English-language daily as well as online, produces*

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## ***Preface***

Dance in the Asia-Pacific region is a diverse cultural matrix where new contemporary dance occurs alongside continuing traditions such as tribal, folk and court dances, and ritual practices. A continuum that expresses all aspects of life, tradition and change, dance is also a 'meeting point' for modernity and post-modernity, history and 'post-history', the present and the future where complex aesthetic and philosophical challenges are negotiated. Artists are addressing these challenges with integrity and subtlety through developing unique performance styles that are constantly evolving. Working through an empathetic approach that is grounded in regional traditions, the choreographers from the countries of the Asia-Pacific region are at the forefront of developing a new international genre of contemporary dance with unique movement vocabularies and narratives. No dance lover, practitioner or scholar can ignore the dynamism and explosion of creative energy from this region.

The books in this series discuss the meeting points, intersections and integration of dance cultures and how choreographers, performers, associated artists, and companies of the region choose to imaginatively invent, blend, fuse, select, and morph these multiple influences. Pedagogy, training, production resources, logistic support, and, in some instances, imposed restrictions such as censorship all impinge on the artistic process — above all, the passion to create, the need to perform and the desire to be heard underpins all art. In dance, the body is a powerful means of dialogue that, through embodiment, encapsulates signs and symbols of place and belief.



Rather than emulating Western dance forms, there is a palpable confidence in personal creative expressions that are valued, applauded and enjoyed — the Asia-Pacific choreographers are making evocative and enigmatic dance theatre that touches a human chord and implicitly shows the power of dance to move and inspire us. The complexity of these developments may not seem a big step to outsiders, but to those versed in the traditional forms, these small steps represent giant leaps.

How does an identity emerge from such eclecticism in the Asia-Pacific region? Dance that is thematically inspired by unique narratives and regional ‘story-telling’ traditions, history and social issues occur alongside predominately abstract choreography constructed from a diversity of movement vocabularies from the East and the West. Choreographers are incorporating imagery that is metaphoric, symbolic and iconic to make poetic statements about their world. In this amalgam memories are embodied, constructed and deconstructed, encoded and decoded into new themes and movement vocabularies in powerful and poignant moments. For instance, across the region, one of the greatest epic stories of all time, the *Ramayana*, a tale that is reinterpreted from India, to Bali, Thailand, Cambodia, and beyond, is explored in a myriad of ways. It is revisited and interrogated by practitioners through film, drama, dance and the visual arts — there is much to contemplate and debate in the interpretation of the characters and the intricacies of the storyline that reveals universal aspects of human frailty such as the struggle between good and evil, weakness and power, lust and greed, the masculine and the feminine, and the search for the soul.

It is timely to be inspired by the breadth and diversity of dance in the Asia-Pacific region. The *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* series focuses on themes of evolving contemporary choreography, tradition and change, inter-cultural research and practice occurring through artist exchanges, pedagogy, revitalizing and preserving cultural heritage — rich areas for research with implications to readers throughout the global village. An important focus

is to highlight the artists' perspective on their work and its cultural and philosophical context through the inclusion of a number of artists' essays in each volume. These insights give invaluable information about the inspiration, intention and cultural connections for the dancers and choreographers. It is also an opportunity to present their thoughts on the dichotomy between the preservation of dance in their communities and the desire to choreograph contemporary dance informed by traditional and classical forms.

There inevitably remain many tensions, dilemmas and uncertainties for both the artists and the audiences where familiar ground is constantly shifting as audiences engage with the new Asian contemporary dance. Rapid changes and the shock of the new may be uncomfortable to some but exhilarating and liberating to others.

Ultimately, despite divergent views and the polarities of the traditional and the contemporary, there is a sense of respect for all that dance offers — for fellow artists and the passion they all share. Audiences in the Asia-Pacific region and across the world are witnessing continuing traditions that bridge and celebrate rich cultural heritages alongside new explorations and eureka moments for both established and developing choreographers. The words of Carl Wolz, the founder of the World Dance Alliance, epitomize the philosophy and content of this series.

*Celebrating the variety, the depth and the beauty of human difference through the art of dance.*

— Singapore, WDA conference 2001

Stephanie Burridge  
Series Editor



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The World Dance Alliance (WDA) serves as primary voice for dance and dancers throughout the world, and encourages the exchange of ideas and the awareness of dance in all its forms. Part of the strategy of the WDA Asia Pacific is to contribute to the research and heritage of affiliated countries through the region.

Special thanks to Joseph Gonzales for curating the Artist's Voices section of the volume.

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## ***Introduction***

Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burrridge

This volume is about dancing diversities in Malaysia — a multicultural nation that celebrates old and not-so-old dance traditions in synchronicity of history, creativity, inventions, and representations of its people, culture and traditions. This collection of articles and interviews celebrates the legacy of dances from the Malay Sultanates to a contemporary remix of old and new dances inspired by a *mélange* of influences from the old world of India, China, European, and indigenous dance traditions, which gives forth dance cultures that vibrate with a multicultural dance experiences. Narratives of eclecticism, syncretic and innovative dance forms and styles reflect the processes of inventing and sharing of dance identities from the era of the colonial Malay states to post-independence Malaysia.

‘Malaysia, Truly Asia’ is the slogan that the Malaysian Tourism Board projects across televisions around Southeast Asia and beyond. Nevertheless, images of lush valleys, sandy beaches, exotic wildlife, and holiday destinations that rival scenery anywhere in the world form simply the ‘skin’ of this country — below this natural splendour, the unique body and soul of the people exists and is the essence of the dance. Dance has prevailed for centuries in Malaysia despite political turmoil, religious dictates, colonial regimes, and internal social upheaval. The elegant *Joget Gamelan* dance derived from the courts of Riau-Lingga and transferred to Pahang and Terengganu, the enchanting dance of *Asyik* in Kelantan,

Malay Muslim-sanctioned *Zapin* from the Straits of Malacca, indigenous dances and folk dances from the Malay Peninsula and neighbouring islands have all survived over the years despite a rapidly changing contemporary Malaysia and intense globalization occurring through its proximity to other countries in the region. Marion D'Cruz, Mohamed Tharuwat Ismail Bakti and Mohd Anis Md Nor discuss the history of these forms, their evolution and the implications of post-colonization in their articles.

India and China have greatly influenced the mix. Premalatha Thiagarajan traces the developments in *Bharatanatyam* dance and shows how luminaries like the late Gopal Shetty, followed by his son Umesh Shetty and Ramli Ibrahim, have extended this story to create the vibrant choreography of the present day. Ibrahim has inducted *Odissi* as a basis for training and a springboard for his choreographies for his company Sutra. Dancers January Low, Dhanya Thurairajah and other artists have embraced this Indian heritage to perform and later create their own choreography. Interesting crossovers occur such as Mavin Khoo's recent work *00.00 - 00.01*, based on the second act of *Swan Lake*, where his training in *Bharatanatyam* and Western classical ballet converge.

Leng Poh Gee examines the important influence that Chinese dance and culture has had on Malaysian choreographers. Many, like Anthony Meh and Jay Jen Loop, have embraced training opportunities in Hong Kong and Taiwan before returning to their homeland with fresh perspectives and experiences gleaned from performing with such illustrious companies as Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, Taiwan and European contemporary companies. Others, such as Mew Chang Tsing, created seminal works such as *Re: Lady White Snake*, reflecting her Chinese heritage that have set a benchmark for creativity and contributed to the evolving identity of Malaysian contemporary dance. Other artists like Lee Swee Keong have taken a reflective, philosophical path influenced by his Chinese ethnicity to inspire his works. Their thoughts and experiences

appear in the Artist's Voices and Biographies section of the book. This section not only documents their personal dance journeys and recent work but also their thoughts about being a creative dance artist in the eclectic, evolving landscape of Malaysian dance.

In a parallel to the push to create urban contemporary work in response to the multicultural richness of Malaysia, others have been inspired by their indigenous heritage and worked within these communities; for instance, *Berturuso*, choreographed by Chen Ing Kuan, is a dance that originated from the elements of *Iban* dance. Chen, founder of Hornland Dance Theatre, based in Sibu, Sarawak, East Malaysia on the island of Borneo and Suhaimi Magi from Sabah respond to the contemporary world through choreography that recounts their concerns about the erosion of traditional culture, and the pace and force of urbanization. Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi was also born in Sabah and, after furthering his studies in dance at ASWARA, returned to Kedah as a choreographer after his graduation. Creating contemporary dance in these environments is challenging and expressive of the performative dichotomy of working within and without the continuing traditions of micro-cultures within a larger national framework. This diversity ensures a rich tapestry of dance and places Malaysia amongst the most diverse, complex and interesting dance nations of the world. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan's chapter 'Dance and Ritual in Sabah' eloquently recounts dance practices imbued with ritual and meaning — 'Dance for Thanksgiving', 'Dance for Healing', 'Dance for Mediation', and 'Dance as the Manifestation of the Unseen'.

Urbanization has led to pathways, or perhaps superhighways, of Malaysian dancers seeking inspiration, training and experience abroad to Europe, Australia and the USA. Some have appeared in musicals on Broadway, the West End in London, in illustrious contemporary dance companies, and projects that have encouraged their individual voices and personalities. Farah Sulaiman, Joseph Gonzales, Michael Xavier Voon,





*Wirama*

Artists: Loh Wei Jun, Umesh Shetty, Judimar Hernandez, Azizi Sulaiman and Kamaludin Daud

Choreographer: Joseph Gonzales

Photo courtesy of Istana Budaya, EMAS 10, 2004

Ramli Ibrahim and many others that have written their stories in the Artist's Voices and Biographies section of this volume; they have interesting tales to tell and insights to provide on the evolving dialogue between the East and the West. Well-equipped and confident dancers such as these have returned home ready to choreograph, mentor, teach, and inspire the next generation either through lecturing at the two major tertiary dance institutions in Kuala Lumpur, the University of Malaya and ASWARA, opening their own dance schools or starting dance companies. Lee Lee Lan, Anthony Meh, Vincent Tan Lian Ho and others have all contributed to this robust ecology that is centred in Kuala Lumpur. Bilqis Hijjas, a recent Malaysian dance graduate from Australia, gives her insights in the article about this transnationalism. A generation of inspired, pioneering women are integral to this history. Mirroring the yearning to express their voices and identity, they have trod in the footsteps of previous generations of the great female choreographers of last century led by Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Pina Bausch, among others. Chapter 9, by Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer, recounts the journeys of three such women — Marion D'Cruz, Aida Redza and Mew Chang Tsing.

While court and indigenous dance is unique and significant in the Malaysian dance story, it is the immigrant and colonial influences that have shaped training and activity. Apart from the influence of Chinese and Indian dance, Western forms such as classical ballet, jazz and the contemporary style of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and other luminaries added significantly to a dance culture that is diverse, fluid and flexible in thought and movement vocabulary and has enabled Malaysian dancers to aspire to international careers and excel on the world stage. The developments of Western classical ballet recounted by Joseph Gonzales and Luigi-style jazz dance by Revathi Murugappan are significant trajectories. Chapter 11 by Su-Ling Choy is an important closing article; she comments on dance criticism and the importance of documentation through writing. Reflective of the contemporary world, she

looks at the role of newspaper criticism as well as online magazines, blogs and the new multimedia approach to dance reporting and critiquing which increases accessibility and exchange of opinion and involvement, particularly of the younger generation, in the spectrum of dance activity.

This book encapsulates the essence of creating within diversity whereby dance artists are crossing multiple boundaries, engaging with international influences and sharing ideas across ethnic and religious divides to create a unique identity. This new 'modernity' provides an exciting platform for Malaysian dancers and choreographers as they effortlessly move between the canons of Western and Eastern dance forms to take ownership of their heritage and identity.



## ***Joget Gamelan — The Royal Dance of the Pahang and Terengganu Courts***

Marion D'Cruz

*Joget Gamelan* is the term used to describe a female classical dance tradition of Malaysia. Once performed in the royal courts of the east coast states of Pahang and Terengganu, it has found its place today in the dance world of contemporary Malaysia. It is considered one of the most important forms of classical Malay dance and is performed by several companies for a variety of occasions.

The word *joget* literally means 'dance' in the Malay language. *Joget* is also a generic name for one of the most popular social dances of Portuguese origin. During the course of its history, *Joget Gamelan* has had several names — *Joget Pahang*, *Joget Terengganu* and *Joget Gamelan*. The Indonesian word *gamelan*, from the root word *gamel* meaning 'hit' or 'struck' is also a generic term meaning 'orchestra'. However, today the term is commonly used to refer to a specific ensemble of musical instruments found in Indonesia and Malaysia and consisting principally of gongs, metal xylophones and drums. In Indonesia, the number of instruments range from a few to as many as 75. In its contemporary practice, *Joget Gamelan* is a court-derived dance form performed with the music of an accompanying gamelan ensemble sufficiently distinct to justify it being called the *Gamelan Melayu*.

The traditional *Gamelan Melayu* ensemble comprises seven instruments:

- the *Sarun Barung*, a six-keyed metal xylophone;
- the *Sarun Peking*, a six-keyed metal xylophone of higher pitch;
- the *Gambang Kayu*, a wooden xylophone with 20 keys;
- the *Keromong*, a gong chime set of 10 inverted gongs in a frame;
- the *Kenong*, a gong chime set of three inverted knobbed gongs on resonator boxes;
- the *Gong Ageng* and *Gong Suwukan*, two large suspended gongs; and
- the *Gendang*, a double-headed barrel drum.

While there are basic similarities between the *Gamelan Melayu* and the Indonesian gamelan, they differ significantly in instrumentation, scale and music.

### **Historical Development (Mid-18th century–19th century)**

The practice of *Joget Gamelan* dates back to the mid-18th century when active court patronage was provided for the arts in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. Among the various courts that patronized the arts, those of Surakarta and Jogjakarta in central Java were particularly active.<sup>1</sup> Many of the South-east Asian courts maintained their own groups of dancers and musicians whose sole function was to perform in the royal precincts. In Javanese courts, classical Javanese dances and gamelan music were performed. In the mid-18th century, a team of court dancers and musicians was sent from central Java to the island of Penyengat, the royal island capital of the Riau-Lingga empire.<sup>2</sup> Javanese style court dance and music were,

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<sup>1</sup> Court patronage of the arts in Java dates back to the Javanese kingdoms of Jogjakarta and Surakarta. Refer to C. Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> This information was gathered from informants at Penyengat. No written records exist.

therefore, introduced at the Istana Kuning (the Yellow Palace), the Penyengat palace, the music being that of the gamelan and the dances consisting mainly of the *Serimpi* and *Bedaya*, the main classical dances of the central Javanese courts.

The 19th-century Riau-Lingga empire was vast. It included the peninsula states of Johor, Pahang and Terengganu, the Riau Archipelago and the Karimon islands and, indeed, loosely, all those parts of Peninsula Malaya over which the colonialists did not exert official control. The states of Johor and Pahang were vassals of the Riau-Lingga empire and, although the *bendaharas* or regents of these two states were virtually independent, they nevertheless paid tribute to their overlord at Penyengat. It was through this association of Pahang with the Riau-Lingga empire that Javanese court dance and music found their way into the Pahang court.

The first occasion for such a phenomenon was the 1811 royal wedding in Pekan, Pahang, of Tengku Husain, the eldest son of Sultan Abdul Rahman of Riau-Lingga and Wan Esah, the sister of Bendahara Wan Ali of Pahang when ‘... the wedding celebrations were enlivened by elaborate court dances, to the accompaniment of an orchestra of gongs and xylophones, which were found only at the Malay courts of Pahang and Lingga’.<sup>3</sup> While it is not known when this particular form of dance and music began in the Pahang court, it is evident, however, that by 1811 the tradition was known and practiced in the Pekan palace.

Bendahara Wan Ahmad, later Sultan Ahmad (1863–1914), inherited the gamelan set as well as the court troupe of dancers and musicians from his father, Bendahara Wan Ali. The form, now called *Joget Pahang*, was firmly established at the Pekan palace under the royal patronage of Bendahara Wan Ahmad. His interest in the form was keen. He obtained three separate sets of gamelan instruments and established three groups of four dancers each. Of his five wives, three maintained a group each: one group was under his royal wife, Tengku Ampuan

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<sup>3</sup> M. Sheppard, ‘Joget Gamelan of Trengganu’, *Straits Times Annual*, Kuala Lumpur: New Straits Times Press, 1969, p. 81.

Fatimah, another under Che Besar and the third under Che Zubedah. Sultan Ahmad and his third wife, Che Zubedah, were particularly interested in *Joget Pahang*. Che Zubedah was a Chinese, and it is believed that she greatly influenced the development of *Joget Pahang*, spending much time and effort particularly in perfecting the dances.

One can clearly identify many 'Chinese' characteristics in *Joget Gamelan*. For example, elements of the costume like the manner in which the sarong is tied, and the particularities of the unusual headdress are a clear deviation from other Malay classical dance costume styles and from *Serimpi* and *Bedaya*. Also, the music of the dance *Timang Burung*, one of the most popular from the *Joget Gamelan* repertoire is, in fact, an old and familiar Chinese folk song.

The tradition of *Joget Pahang* was, therefore, firmly established in the Pahang court by the end of the 19th century. Court dancers and musicians trained rigorously from an early age and, in most cases, they were full-time court artists. The dancers and some of the musicians were the children of various court personnel — the Sultan himself, the aristocracy, relatives of the Sultan and Sultanah (his consort) resident in the court, attendants, courtiers, and servants. A few members of the troupe, especially among the musicians, were also royal servants, cooks, courtiers, and attendants. Hence, they fulfilled a dual role in the court. Outsiders were never allowed to become musicians or dancers in a court troupe. Swettenham recalls, 'the dancers "*budak joget*" belong to the Raja's household, they may even be attached to him by a closer tie'.<sup>4</sup> Little is known about the actual working of the troupes in the Pahang court, except that they rehearsed daily and performed for various occasions such as weddings, birthdays, festivals and gave private performances for special guests. It is one such occasion that Swettenham witnessed and describes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> F. Swettenham, 'The Joget', *Malay Sketches*, London: The Ballantyne Press, 1895, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44–51.