



# 30 And Counting

**THE ACTORS STUDIO CONTINUES TO SHINE  
THE SPOTLIGHT ON PERFORMING ARTS.**

By: Anu Venugopal

"If you don't have a soul, you're not whole. And the arts is what gives you the soul, the *rasa*," said Joe Hasham, Co-Founder & Artistic Producer of klpac, The Actors Studio & penangpac.

These sentiments are echoed by Dato' Dr Faridah Merican, the Co-Founder & Executive Producer of the three companies - and his wife.

"We don't want the arts to be given a back seat, we want it to be relished, appreciated and put out there in front, for everybody," added Faridah, sharing her thoughts about their journey at their artistic headquarters, klpac.

Known as the country's own power (arts) couple, the duo began the journey of a lifetime in April 1989, when they started their own little theatre. Inspired by their friend who had a theatre in Washington called Studio Theatre, they decided to call their labour of love - The Actors Studio (TAS).

Armed with savings, passion in their hearts and a distinctive logo designed by Pius Eugene Pillai, Faridah and Joe began their quest to nurture, educate and entertain Malaysians in all forms of performing arts - and have not turned back since.

Today, TAS is a familiar name among performing arts followers in the country, and the founders are among Malaysia's most recognisable personalities. While Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (klpac) is their base now, when they just started, TAS alongside artistic counterparts such as Five Arts Theatre, Instant Cafe Theatre and Sutra Dance Theatre had a common problem - finding the right space for them to put up shows for the public.

"We didn't want to worry about renting spaces from authorities, only to be asked to leave because they wanted the space. That was the norm then and in fact, it is still happening today" added Faridah.

Whether by fate or coincidence, Joe was shooting a documentary at Plaza Putra, saw empty spaces that were perfect for their theatre. On 9 August 1995, TAS officially found its first home - and created theatre history by the first privately owned and operated theatre space in Malaysia.

"We had two theatres, four studios and a research centre/ deli there. Famous people like the filmmaker James Lee worked at the resource centre, making coffee and talking to actors there. Wonderful people like Lee Swee Kiong, Hands Percussion, Huzir Sulaiman started their careers there and Harith Iskandar was the longest running standup comedy show 5 years," recalled Joe.

"We were enabled to enable theatre companies who could not afford to rent space. We allowed them to have the show at the theatre and we would share any profits they got. We still do that nowadays with some companies," added Faridah.

They went on to open the TAS Studio Academy in 1998, an avenue for practitioners wanting to expand their skills. The first batch of students were the Who's Who of Malaysian performing arts scene - the likes of Patrick Teoh, Tiara Jacquelina, Fauziah Nawati, Ramli Hassan and Leslie Dawson.

While they were busy spreading the knowledge and intricacies of the performing arts, Faridah and Joe achieved more milestones for the beloved company. In 2001, TAS's second theatre opened at Bangsar Shopping Centre (BSC) and a year later, The Actors Studio @ Greenhall opened its doors in Penang.

Despite making progress, Faridah and Joe struggled to make ends meet, putting in more of their own money as well as sourcing for funds to fund TAS. Barely a year later, their efforts came crumbling down when on 10 June, flash floods in the heart of Kuala Lumpur destroyed the entire Plaza Putra complex. Faridah and Joe lost an estimated RM1 million and had to close the space - which they describe as "the truest learning that will stick in our memories forever."



"The flood came and took everything," recalled Faridah.  
"It was devastating," admitted Joe.  
"But it was a blessing in disguise," said Faridah.  
"It introduced us to klpac" added Joe.

Ten days after the floods happened, Faridah got a call from well-known landscape artist Ng Sek San, who told her about a perfect spot for their next venue. They visited the old National Railway (KTM) warehouse in YTL Corporation's Sentul West and fell in love with the place.

Fate intervened once again, this time at TAS's donation drive Banjir, which featured a series of performances that raised funds for the company. At the event, Faridah met the late Datin Paduka Endon Mahmud, wife of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Kak Endon, connected them both to YTL Corp Bhd's managing director, Tan Sri Francis Yeoh. Joe and Faridah met Tan Sri Francis and talked about their idea and he uttered the most famous words in Malaysian theatre - "Go For It!"

On May 9 2005, KLPac opened its doors to the public. A fully-integrated performing arts centre, comprises of a 504-seat proscenium theatre, a 190-seat experimental black box theatre, a 100-seat flexible space, nine studios and supporting facilities - surrounded by lush green scenery.

"klpac is dedicated to the people of KL. Joe and I both believe because of this dedication, this place is here to stay, for as long as there is Kuala Lumpur and people of Kuala Lumpur," added Faridah, who was conferred the 'Darjah Dato' Paduka Tuanku Ja'afar' by the Yang Di-Pertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan in the same year,

As TAS and KLPac presented local and international productions to arts lovers in the capital city, the pair had their share of setbacks - which included being forced to close down the much-loved theatre space in BSC in 2009.

"It was the most commercially viable space that we have ever had, because of its location, parking, with a good mix of locals and expats. Everyone to this day, asks us "Why did you leave Bangsar? We loved going to BSC," said Joe.

The year proved to be a significant year for the company, as TAS @Lot 10, with its unique Hanamichi-thrust stage began operations while their Greenhall theatre closed its doors to the public. In November 2011, they found a new home for arts enthusiasts in Penang at the Performing Arts Centre of Penang (penangpac). In 2014, they also designed and started KuAsh Theatre, now under a different management.

Over the course of 30 years, the inspiring pair have steered TAS towards training, educating and grooming Malaysia's best performing artists through acting, directing, playwriting workshops and courses through various platforms including the annual Short+Sweet Malaysia and Theatre for Young People. Its residency programme has successfully added talents such as Gavin Yap, Christopher Ling, Mark Beau de Silva and Omar Ali on to Malaysia's list of performing artists to look out for.

"We did not know where these classes would take us but we have often hoped that it would take us to higher places. When Pak Lah was Prime Minister, he told us that we should get connected with an institution of higher learning, but we did not know where to look," said Faridah, who was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the BOH Cameronian Arts Awards in 2004.

Back then they had no way of knowing that they had a date with destiny. Last year, they received a call from Taylors Universe with a proposal to collaborate on Malaysia's first conservatory degree programme in the performing arts and focusing on two tracks - Performance & Technical Theatre, starting August 2019.

"I am sure that the phone call, had something to do with the fact that not only have been producing plays, but also because we have been teaching the arts since in 1989," added Faridah, who was awarded a Doctorate of the Arts by Taylor's University.

The husband and wife team are hoping that the degree programme will answer some of the industry's needs - more writers, directors, lighting directors and set designers and more importantly, young graduates keen to improve their skill set - a quality that Joe believes is missing in many young talents today.

"We have talented performing artists in the country but many take things for granted. They lack the attitude, discipline and focus required to be truly great. In any other country in the world, it is an honour to get invited to an audition, but here, they don't value the opportunity. Nor do they take up the chance to attend workshops to learn new skills," said Joe, without mincing his words.



While their thoughts seem disparaging at first, the two say they still have hope for the younger generation of theatre practitioners, with small and dedicated theatre companies such as theatretwentythree, encouraging young people to experience and get involved in the arts.

Faridah's own story of joining the big bold world of theatre in an inspiring one. Born in Penang in October 1939, she attended the Kota Bharu Teachers Training College in 1957. She moved to Kuala Lumpur two years later and worked as a teacher, freelancing in radio and television before moving on to the world of advertising at SH Benson, now known as Ogilvy. She continued to be involved in the theatre scene, gaining fame for productions including Uda Dan Dara (1972), Alang Rentak Seribu (1974) and Tok Perak (1975). She met Joe in the mid 80's and the rest is, as they say, history.

The charismatic Joe, was born 4 September 1948 in Tripoli, Lebanon and moved to Sydney, Australia at a young age. A graduate of Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art, he was famous in the 1970's for his role of gay lawyer Don Finlayson in the soap opera Number 96. After joining forces with Faridah in a personal and professional capacity in the 1980's, he has made Malaysia his home. A part from being a recognisable actor, with an equally recognisable voice talent, he has also directed productions such as The Importance of Being Earnest (2002), Someone Who'll Watch Over Me (2011) and Rashomon (2013) among many others.

Passion and experience aside, TAS's biggest challenge over the years lies primarily in the funding and manpower, with the latter a challenge due to the lack of funds.



"Theatre people must meet people with the same passion, heart, drive and motivation. Every theatre group must meet up and tell them "We need the funding and we cannot do it on our own". That is nothing to be ashamed of," said Faridah candidly. As far as financial support from the government goes, there have not been changes or sponsorship since the new Pakatan Harapan government came into power. Joe admits that if not for the generosity of their sponsors over the years, TAS would not have been able to survive.

"We are blessed and the arts is lucky. It doesn't come by every other day but it can happen and does happen. Our most loyal partners and sponsors like Yayasan Sime Darby, JTI, Mercedes Benz, Carlsberg have stuck with us all these while. Our latest guardian angels are Creador Foundation and Mr DIY," added Joe.

While sustaining a brand for 30 years is an accomplishment on its own, Joe, 70 and Faridah, 79, have zero plans of retiring. Their commitment to the Malaysian theatre scene continues as they

continue to expand their own skills and steer others towards achieving more for performing arts in Malaysia.

Fittingly, the company's anniversary celebrations began in 2018, with almost 50 productions, classics and new works being staged at KLPac. Among these include a restaging of their very first play Norm and Ahmed, as well as favourites Stories For Amah and Kandang.

The founders who share this significant anniversary together with their "baby", wish that performing arts have a pertinent role in the lives of Malaysians from different backgrounds and that TAS and KLPac continue its legacy for the next 30 years and beyond.

"When our time comes, Joe and I are will be looking down from the big theatre in the sky at the people who will be taking TAS to greater heights," said Faridah, with a smile on her face.



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*Dato Dr Faridah Merican.*

