



Merdeka: The Past, Present and Future

AS THE NATION CELEBRATES 59 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE ON AUGUST 31, THERE ARE MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS AMONG MALAYSIANS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE. WE ASK A FEW OF OUR FAVOURITE PERFORMING ARTS PRACTITIONERS THEIR THOUGHTS OF MERDEKA AND HOPES FOR OUR BELOVED NATION.

Dr Joseph Victor Gonzales

*Head Of Dance,
National Academy Of Arts,
Culture and Heritage (Aswara)*

Merdeka was fun day, an expression of joy and exuberance through waving of flags, parades as a child. Today as a more mature citizen, Dr Joseph asks the question - what it means to be free, historically from our colonial masters, or have I merely exchanged one master for others?

"As a citizen of Malaysia today, I am appalled by the lack of personal freedoms - the freedom to choose one's faith (and its expression), to choose who and how one loves, one's politics, etc. The level of "policing" in all aspects of life is invasive and it is building a society of fear, not of freedom," said Dr Joseph, who is also the Artistic Director/Choreographer at ADC Malaysia.

Describing himself as a "postcolonial scholar of dance", Dr Joseph has have spent the better part of the last two decades unfolding the layers of meaning of personal identity through dance, of national identity. He was instrumental in choreographing Lail Majnun, Tun Perak and the opening ceremony of the 16th Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur.

These days, Dr Joseph is busy conducting workshops all across the country doing traditional dances and introducing it to more young Malaysians for free. He is also working towards the KL International Arts Festival 2016 in September, and looks forward to challenging himself on an international platform.

Among his Malaysian heroes is Ahmad Merican - a man who was there when they played the Negaraku for the first time on air, and created entertainment shows featuring the early Malaysian pioneers of dance. Dr Joseph also admires Dato Onn Jaafar for his integrity, charisma, passion and ideology.

"I hope for more works of greater and better quality, greater availability for funding for productions and investments in young artists, just as how it is investing in young athletes, as well as audience development. I really hope that arts is introduced to children from Primary School. For the nation, I pray for Peace, Harmony and Equality/ Meritocracy - a strive for excellence and begin to change the ethnocentricity of the mindsets of Malaysians," he revealed.

Lex Lakshman Balakrishnan

*Dancer, Choreographer,
Facilitator at The Actors Studio
Academy, KLPac*

"Merdeka to me is not a day, but a philosophy. We went from one colonisation to another. For me, it's no longer a celebration, but just an advertised event. The celebration of the day should be done 365 days of the year. Why is not practiced but advertised?" he asks.

For Lex, Merdeka was a big thing as he grew up. His father, who used to work in the army used to take him and his sister to Dataran Merdeka to see the parade. Being a nationalist was a quality engraved in the family. Reflecting on the current situation, Lex believes that we are, as a nation still separate.

"People don't want to go and watch the parade, because they don't feel like going anymore. I believe our nationality broke because the media, as we watch our own shows. We just need to change the channel on television. We are separating ourselves inside out rather than outside in," revealed the director of well-received contemporary dance drama Nitya Sumangali.

For the graduate from the National Arts Academy (ASWARA), his one (and only) Malaysian hero is Tun Mahathir, who he believes brought the people together with his passion and plans for the country, besides products such as Proton Saga, Kancil, the sarong and kuaci.

"I hope that the Pendidikan Seni subject in schools would be relooked and revamped to include budaya (Cultural art). It should be changed then it makes sense for arts graduate to teach people. I have the hope that something will bring us together," he added.

Presently pursuing a Masters in Art in Dance at University Malaya, KLPac's ex-Choreographer in Residence is on a mission to explore the different facets of the Malaysian Indian identity through the contemporary dance platform, focusing on going beyond Bharatananyam and Bollywood.



Peter Ong

*Executive Director of PAM Productions,
Classical singer – opera, lieder
and musical theatre*

With a grandfather who was active in pre and post Independence politics, he hails from a patriotic Penang family. For the versatile Peter Ong, there's a lot more to Malaysia's Independence Day than Merdeka Day. He believes that Malaysia Day should be celebrated as a bigger day, as September 16 marks the birth of Malaysia which encompasses the Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, instrumental in the creation of Malaya as an independent state, is also Peter's top pick for a Malaysian hero. His speeches, creed and vision made Malaysians feel that everything was possible - a sentiment which is lacking in the present. The stage artiste admits that the everyday Malaysians, like Syed Azmi and other unsung heroes inspire and motivate him.

"We spend too much time grandising various public officers but not enough is being said on everyday Malaysians who reach out to other Malaysians to make a difference. I'd like to say thank you for caring for the aged, for smiling, for reaching out the wildlife. These are my Malaysian heroes. Whether or not difference is made, they are trying," he revealed.

The talented Ong who performs in Singapore frequently will be performing in Singapore Lyric Opera's production of "Turandot" from August 26 to 30 and is all set to polish his non-Mandarin speaking skills to perform in his first ever Mandarin Musical piece in the Lion City.

"I wish Malaysians would have more faith in ourselves, in our talents and capacity. There is so much talent here. We can be so much more. We have to ask ourselves - do we really support Malaysians? We are such a colourful nation and I think we should be more curious, be a part of something bigger, better and brighter - and we can do this by doing seeing, trying and doing something new," said the stage artist in productions such as Cabaret and The Producers.

Malik Taufik

Theatre Actor & Singer

While Merdeka is a day that means 'bye bye colonialists' for Malik, he feels the need to observe September 16, which is more significant in today's view. In the late 90's, his close friends and him used to celebrate the early hours of Merdeka day at Dataran Merdeka near the Lake Gardens to watch the armed forces blast their cannons announcing the number of years of Malaysia's independence. Now the family spends the day celebrating his nephew's birthday at home. The patriotic family still raises the flag as a symbol respect and remembrance of our forefathers.

"My first hero pair are Dato Faridah Merican and her amazing husband Joe Hasham OAM for their perseverance and dedication towards uplifting the performing arts industry. The second hero I admire greatly for his generosity, forward thinking towards the growth of the nation and the Rakyat is Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar al-Bukhary. These people are inspirational for their contributions to my country," said the lead of KLPac's Adam The Musical in 2010.

Working full time in the insurance industry and running marathons, Malik takes time to indulge in a variety of performing arts productions including musicals and is preparing himself for the upcoming Short & Sweet Festival at KLPac.

"I wish for a complete turnaround in our education system, making education more holistic, to remove the regurgitation of facts, religion and politics ingrained in the current system; and to include performing arts and vocational experiences into the curriculum," added Malik, whose latest stage credit includes KLPac's R & J - a part of the Shakespeare 400 Festival, in conjunction with the famous playwright's quartercentenary death anniversary.



Mark Beau De Silva

*Resident Director / Writer at KLPac,
Facilitator at The Actors Studio Academy*

For Mark, August 31 is a day of reflection on how far we have come (and how far we have not come) and how much more do we have to go. With parents in the police force, Mark remembers sitting in front of the television trying to spot them march in the national parade at Dataran Merdeka. He also recalls watching a local 80's movie *Rahsia*, which depicted the song 'Saya Anak Malaysia' naturally.

"In the 80's people were happy about the country. I was a boy then but patriotism was there. My grandfather and father were talking about putting up flags and it was all done naturally, but that's missing now. Why are people not putting up the flag these days? I think the *rasa* and the spirit is different. I think it happens because of us and also the climate, things that are happening, said the winner of Best Director in the Short and Sweet Theatre Festival in 2011.

His Malaysian-made heroes are his many teachers – his parents, his English teacher Jasmine Emanuel, who with her husband, raised at least 40 orphans at their home. She taught him that teaching wasn't confined to a subject but about life too. Mark also pays tribute to his performing arts teachers Joe (Hasham) and Faridah (Merican), who have taught and nurtured him since he entered the performing arts industry –and is in turn teaching young people to develop their arts skills through the TFYP programme, with its latest edition in July.

"We have been to both government and international schools to conduct Shakespeare's projects. If there's a competition between the two types of schools, the international ones always win. It's not because of lack of passion but rather education. If the government sees the arts as an important part of education, then we as teachers will be able to teach them better too. I wish there will be a time when we go to an international school and we won't be surprised with their facilities for the arts," he added.

Tria Aziz

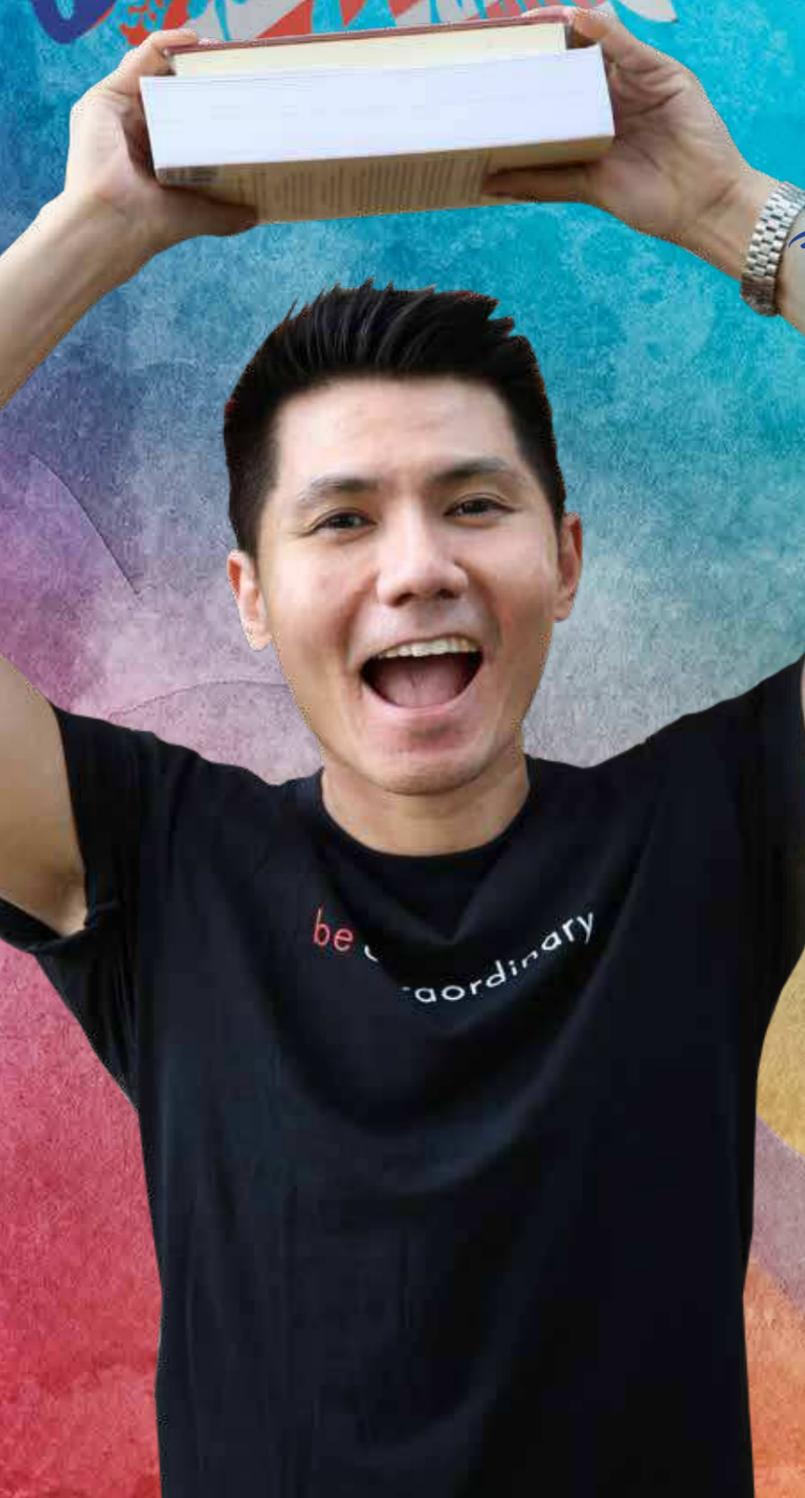
Actor, Singer, Dancer

Busy rehearsing the role of Gertrude in *Tragedi Hamlet*, to be presented by KLPac from August 4 to 7, Tria Aziz hopes to go on a road trip or visit Sabah during Merdeka Day. The talented performer, mother and water birth advocate remembers how her mom used to take her to the Kuantan stadium, where she awed by the colours and excitement of a national celebration.

"Merdeka is being accepted as the person I am by my fellow people, with no judgement on what I do or wear by anyone. It is the ability to be free to express myself (responsibly of course) and not be afraid that I will be taken into police custody for voicing my thoughts. Merdeka to me, is also being confident enough to know that my kids will be safe here in this country and knowing that their education would not limit their true potentials," said 2014's winner of the Best Musical Performer award at the Boh Cameronian Arts Awards.

The big-voiced Tria Aziz who mesmerised audience in musicals such as *The Edge* and *Broken Bridges* feels Tunku Abdul Rahman is one of the true Malaysian heroes. He worked towards Malaysian independence and attained it. The other is Tun Dr. Ismail for his efforts to unite people of all races together after the chaos of the infamous May 13 incident.

"I wish to see Malay folks hug their Chinese or non- Malay acquaintance. We are pretty colour blind in the stage performing arts however it is somewhat different outside, in real life. Intolerance is real and it is not acceptable anymore at this day and age. We've gone through much over the years to still consider people who are not of the same colour as "others". It's time we say Sudah Sudah Lah Tu! Despite our outward differences, we're all the same with the same fears and hope. We should focus on our similarities and not fear the difference," added Tria.



Nandang Abdul Rahman

Playwright and Partner,
TheatreThirtySixty

IT manager by day, Nandang Abdul Rahman commemorates the day when the reins of the nation and her future course was handed over to her own citizens. 59 years later, he still believes it should honour the day as a milestone that steered us to the path of an independent nation.

Nandang remembers waking up early on Merdeka Day to watch the televised parade from Dataran Merdeka as a young boy, and enjoying the holiday by watching cartoons after it ended. From Form 1 to Form 3, he was a part of the St John's Ambulance brigade and looked forward to being called to be part of the parade to provide first aid support but was disappointed that school never got called to serve.

"My Malaysian heroes would be the Thomas Cup 1992 badminton team. I remember watching the game on TV with bated breath, following their every move, cheering as loudly as everyone on the street that we lived in. It was as if the whole neighborhood was watching the same thing and I'm sure the whole nation was too. The cheers that erupted when the final point was won still echoes in my mind and that feeling of pride for our Thomas Cup boys was something that I will never forget. They were the heroes of the day who as still the heroes that I remember fondly to this day," recalled Nandang, whose writing talents have been seen on stage in productions such as The Five Stages of Grief and One for a Road.

If he had a wish, Nandang would be more than happy to have more money for his little theatre company to cover the operational items like utilities, maintenance and rent for their performance space. The funds would be useful as would be able to keep production costs low, which in turn makes it possible for them to pass the savings to the audience form of cheaper ticket prices and adding on to the audience pool.

Currently deep in rehearsals for "Titus Andronicus" directed by the company's artistic director, Christopher Ling, it is their first Shakespeare production and will be a part of the the DPAC Arts Festival 2016 at Damansara Performing Arts Center from July 30 to August 7.

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