

# **QADIM**

## **An intercultural contemporary dance collaboration in Malaysia**

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### **Introduction**

This paper intends to provide an insight into the process that led to the production of an intercultural contemporary dance work staged in Malaysia entitled QADIM. In the light of racial unrest in late 2007<sup>1</sup> in Malaysia, and escalating global tensions, this exploration and presentation has taken on new meaning and significance for the performing arts in Malaysia. This is a personal reflection of that journey. The processes described in this production are not unique and share distinct similarities with other intercultural collaborations taking place on the global stage. However, the paper is intended to open doors of understanding to collaborative dance-making within the Malaysian context, the negotiation between cultures and its usefulness in attempting to level the playing field of ethnicities and religious beliefs. This dance production is the manifestation of an alternate interpretation of both multiculturalism and of the desired status of various ethnic groups in Malaysia. The importance of this dance performance is that it has provided a voice to a different representation of Malaysian identity on stage and counter narratives of communities working within the shared public spaces of the nation.

The journey began when, for six weeks from July 2 to August 18 2006, I gathered with 18 artists at the Centre of Intercultural Performance, Department of World Arts and Cultures at the University of California in Los Angeles for the Asia Pacific Performing Arts Exchange Program (APPEX)<sup>2</sup>. There were nine musicians, one of whom was a singer, eight dancers and one theatre practitioner variously from the USA, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, India and Malaysia. The gender and ethnic breakdown of the American artists were: two women of Indian origin, one woman of Taiwanese ancestry, one male from the Philippines, and another a Japanese Californian native. The remaining were male Caucasians. The Asian artists were dancer-

choreographers and musician-composers – a male and female each from Indonesia and the Philippines, two males from Malaysia and India and a female dancer from Thailand, who had spent the last year at UCLA pursuing her post-graduate studies. My journey into the APPEX program was via administration, teaching and choreography. APPEX was to be my artistic pilgrimage, as I had not engaged in any extended period of such participation, divorced from my routine and ‘comfort zone’ in a long time. I was ready to move into the altered space and state of a full-time student and absorb it all.

### **Challenges in the APPEX model**

The APPEX artists, aged from 27 to 46 years, had all achieved a measure of recognition within their own communities, while some were known at a national level in their respective countries. These APPEX artists were at different points in their careers, with a range of artistic goals rooted in achieving personal growth manifested through their work in education, community projects or performance practice. The biggest challenge in this APPEX collective was the varying degrees of proficiency in English, as communication is always a contentious issue when working across personal or national borders. Communication in English was not always smooth, with subtleties, nuances, and implied and embedded meanings sometimes lost in translation. There were numerous occasions when those with quieter personalities (and it should not be assumed that these were the Asian artists), would choose not to express themselves rather than engage in tedious and tiring confrontation. This imbalance affected the democratisation of the cultural exchange between the artists and unfortunately meant that the full potential of artistic discovery or personal growth may not have been realised. One strategy employed by the APPEX program to tackle the issue of language was to have multi-lingual participants and facilitators who could act as intermediaries. This did ease the burden of miscommunication but did not wholly eradicate the problem.

Another contentious issue was the personal practice habits of the artists – the intense physicality, solitude and rigidity of artists who were trained in classical or modern musical instrument or dance forms versus the laid-back or fluid methods of others who were from folk traditions, or who were used to working as part of an ensemble. Some artists preferred a concentrated quiet time and space for personal practice while others relished the communal working environment, which were extensions of the practice philosophy in their respective countries or art forms. These issues were not always negotiated with acceptance and in some cases became a wedge that widened with time. An important lesson learned was that different methods worked for different people, and one size did not fit all. Fortunately, there were enough artists at APPEX for everyone to find his or her own preferred collaborators who naturally gravitated together, or groups were conscientiously assembled based on areas of mutual interest.

In every creative laboratory, there needs to be a master plan to facilitate exploration and refinement of ideas. This structure should accommodate, encourage, nurture and cultivate the development of artistic ideas and work towards the preparation for performance. Within this structure there would

need to be room for flexibility and malleability to manoeuvre. This required a fine balance between having enough space and at the same time a certain degree of control. At APPEX, there were many great ideas and flashes of inspiration that sometimes led us onto a fulfilling path but that, in equal measure, led to despair, when it was difficult to envisage a final product. The APPEX artists suffered 'creative blocks' from time to time, like all other artists, when the ideas did not flow. To negotiate these challenges discipline, stamina, motivation and focus were needed to keep persevering, to keep the lines of dialogue open, to keep the learning interesting, to 'play' and to be continuously inspired. The participants were supported artistically and emotionally by the experienced APPEX conveners and facilitators<sup>3</sup> who guided the process by providing insightful suggestions or by simply asking pertinent questions at the appropriate time.

The APPEX program consisted of both workshops and public performances. The public performance component was divided into two showings. The first titled 'Salon', was presented at the start of the residency where the artists showcased their individual expertise. The second and final showing at the end of the residency was a series of concerts billed 'At Home in This World' that presented the various collaborations reflecting the journey of the six-week residency. What was fascinating in this APPEX program was that even for the 'Salon' performances, there were collaborations already taking place. This was testimony to the spirit, openness and eagerness of some of the artists to start working together quickly. For example, Leonard Cruz, an American contemporary dancer performed one of my works *Windows and Walls* that necessitated early morning rehearsals before the other programmed activities took place.

The final performances were an unbelievable experience, personally, as I had not performed for a period of five years prior to this. Thus I made my American stage debut, which was an early career dream, at the Gloria Kauffman Theatre, at the ripe old age of 46 and clearly beyond my wildest expectations.

People make these journeys not only to fulfill a religious obligation, but also to see the world, sharing in the camaraderie that 'going away' enlivens – a liminal time-space well known to poet Geoffrey Chaucer as he recounted in his *Canterbury Tales*.

(Schechner, 2006, p. 288)

The APPEX experience transported me to a higher plane of consciousness and artistry, of sharing, of performing, and gave me new insights and parameters. This liminality has extended well into my return to the harsh realities of Malaysian artistic life and proceeded to push me into new un-chartered territories. Reflection upon my career clearly showed that although I had collaborated with many international artists, I had not done work as a collaborator with fellow Malaysian artists since the mid-90s when the ASWARA<sup>4</sup> was first established and I had the privilege to work extensively with Suhaimi Magi, Aida Redza, Lena Ang<sup>5</sup> and Judimar Hernandez. Since

then, I had directed, choreographed and taught but never shared the same empty space with other artists as a performer.

A meeting was held in November 2006 with artists that I thought were interesting – personally and professionally – those who were important contributors to the growth and development of Malaysian contemporary dance together with younger artists who had potential and would benefit from the experience. The result was QADIM performed on the 17-18<sup>th</sup> March 2007 at the Experimental Theatre, ASWARA. I had decided on the title of the project QADIM on the outset as it means ‘that which goes on forever’. This title was generic so that it would fit with whatever shape or form the final project metamorphosed into. The intention was that the product would be a valuable case study for those interested in intercultural collaborations and for young artists to reflect and base their subsequent journeys upon. As an artist and teacher, one of my primary intentions is to inspire exciting new works in Malaysia and the application of theories that inform practice and vice versa. This praxis is a potent tool in the development of dance, and creating frameworks for accessibility and scholarship.

### **The process and the product**

From January 2007, Judimar Hernandez, Elaine Pedley, Gan Chih Pei, Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi, Ismadian Ismail, Umesh Shetty, Aris Kadir, Azizi Sulaiman, Dhanya Thurairajah<sup>6</sup> and I met every Tuesday and Thursday for approximately 2.5 to 5 hours. Two others Amy Len Siew Mee and Steve Goh<sup>7</sup> had to pull out due to conflicting schedules and commitments. Sharing the model for exchange developed at APPEX was the start of the process. This involved varied sessions that included sharing personal stories specifically those from ages 12-18 years, inspirational people or significant moments that changed the course of our lives, our family backgrounds, our beliefs and religious practices, hobbies and so on. It was wonderful to discover nuggets of information about the lives of the collaborating artists and this knowledge drew us closer together. The life experiences of the APPEX artists were extremely varied and stories from this period of their lives ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous, from personal loss or shattered relationships, which are not uncommon to the bizarre incident of witnessing cows being struck down by lightning on a farm! There were shared memories, from time served in the Peace Corps to experiences during catastrophes like volcano eruptions and severe earthquakes. In this particular Malaysian context, the experiences were not drastically diverse and the commonalities were greater. It is not intended here to assign grades on life experiences but simply to note the differences. Initial sessions involved intense communication and sharing, warm-up routines, movement sequences and sometimes hardly any ‘moving’. As a result of these sessions, topics were identified for further development, and investigation was based on individual areas of focus and mutual interest. Almost immediately, the artists zeroed in on the racial, cultural and religious integration of the ensemble that was a reflection of Malaysia and the global village.

The integrative is based on the assumption that people from different cultures can not only work together successfully but can also harmonise different aesthetic, social, and belief systems, creating fusions or hybrids that are

whole and unified. This is not a question of one culture or performance overwhelming others, but of evolving something new from a basis of mutual respect and reciprocity.

(Schechner, 2006, p.304)

The next step was to create movement vocabulary based on these selected topics and here, improvisation was the key to introducing individual styles to each other. The QADIM ensemble took a similar approach to the APPEX model where the movement laboratories were led each time by a different artist. One aspect which worked better for this ensemble was that there were greater areas of mutual kinesthetic understanding while the drawback was that QADIM did not involve music collaborators, which can be remedied should it be restaged. Here, the dance technique provided a strong foundation of 'form'. Although the genres of *bharata natyam*, ballet or *zapin* are varied, these artists shared common dance vocabulary and that which was 'alien' to them, they were eager to learn, able to absorb and ultimately, achieve a high level of proficiency. From these sessions, ideas and phrases began to flow freely that were then rehearsed and polished. Collaborators were assigned tasks to either develop sequences of dance movements, or to do specific research. This placed the onus and the ownership of the work on each individual artist.

Every performer strives for perfection and artistic excellence. However, the QADIM artists arrived at the consensus that focus on the public performance could erode the organic development of the process. They realised that it was possible to produce a finished product that might satisfy the audience tastes but fails to make meaning of the journey, as reiterated by Jit (2002. p. 115) that '... emphasis on process rather than product transports us to new directions in multicultural performance.' There is freedom in not being bogged down by the performativity of performance and this understanding possibly releases more creative energy. Nevertheless, focus on the process did not imply that there was no concern for the product and rehearsals were also geared towards fine-tuning through culling material.

In my diachronic analysis of the development of contemporary dance choreography in Malaysia<sup>8</sup>, all collaborations excluding the multidisciplinary explorations (especially visual or installation art) have thus far primarily focused on the multicultural aspect of Malaysian society. Examples of such intercultural explorative work include *Re: Lady White Snake* by Mew Chang Tsing, *Butterfly Lovers* by The Temple of Fine Arts and *Soraya*, the ballet by Lee Lee Lan. These performances incorporated the diverse multicultural dance genres practised in Malaysia. The QADIM ensemble was comprised ethnically and religiously of four Malay Muslims, one Chinese Buddhist, two Indian Hindus and three Catholics made up of a Caucasian South American, a Eurasian and an Indian, with its gender composition of five ladies and five gentlemen. This democratic composition of the ensemble was not deliberate but through providence. Discussions of intention began by deciding and eliminating where we did *not* want to go. Deep deliberation revealed that all artists univocally wanted to veer away from a pastiche of the multitude of vocabularies present in the mix such as modern dance, classical ballet, Malay

*zapa*, Chinese and *bharata natyam*. That would have been an easier and more predictable path for creation of work that had already been tried and tested. It was the artists' opinion that this process would not help in creating material through a more organic process. The collaborators' most important message was how we could share the same space respectfully and make a commentary on the potential for harmonious, non-threatening co-existence not simply in Malaysia<sup>9</sup> but with a universal message, in the light of global violence borne of religious intolerance and misunderstanding. This thought process cleared the pathway for QADIM to move from becoming an intercultural collaboration to an inter-religious exploration of dance and interpretation *through* dance. The dancer-choreographers in this production possessed strong opinions regarding the unequal status of religious practice in Malaysia and were intent on giving a voice to their points of view. This is reaffirmed by Jit (2003, p. 202) who, when analysing contemporary trends, observes that '[w]hat is also important is that they are introducing the notion of the dancer as thinker. Their eclecticism, cross-cultural outlook, and plurality of approach, describe the present values and directions of contemporary dance in Malaysia.'

It was providence that there was an innate harmony among the participating artists. The sense of spirituality was tangible and potent. Religiosity is at the core of the majority of Malaysian families and that was the experience that these QADIM collaborators brought to the negotiating table of the dance studio. Would this experience be unique to Malaysia? This question cannot be answered with authority and without being presumptuous about religious beliefs, global experiences or practices. What does make it significant or at least interesting is that this performance took place in a country where Islam is the official religion and the religion of the majority, *and* that the project received funding from the government.<sup>10</sup>

The next step in the process was education and/or re-education, dependent on the individual artist, on the various beliefs systems represented. Everyone was put on a fact-finding mission and the information was shared. None of the artists professed to be devoutly religious, experts on scriptural texts or religious literature, but having inherited their beliefs and grown up with them, possessed a degree of understanding. The artists shared insights, personal interpretations, profound experiences and even humorous anecdotes regarding their faith practices. An example of sharing included participant observation of the Muslim ablution ritual of cleansing prior to beginning the prayers that was not privileged knowledge to other members of the group. The non-Muslims were granted special access into the private spaces of personal worship. It was incredibly moving to be invited to witness the ritual of prayer. The sense of respectfulness was palpable and that inclusivity was reassuring, breaking down the barriers between self and other, between Muslim and non-Muslim.

While Malaysia is multicultural and multi-religious, exposure to the 'other' religion, culture and tradition, is sometimes presumed while in fact there is still tremendous ignorance. It was observed that while the national ideals of multiculturalism were promoted and encouraged, individual experiences could

be isolated to remain within specific ethnic groups and remote from other cultures. That Islam is Malaysia's official religion is sometimes intrusive to the 'other' when for example television programs are abruptly interrupted to announce the call for prayer, the *azan*, five times in one day. In the lived experience of the average non-Muslim Malaysian, that practice is an obtrusion making a direct assault on personal freedoms, spaces and choices. This phenomenon of ethnocentricity is prevalent in minority cultures that have a stronger sense of impermanence and thus strive to retain and perpetuate their cultures and traditions more aggressively than those of the Indigenous peoples. Factors such as the NEP<sup>11</sup>, preferential treatment, race-based politics as well as ethnic-specific neighborhoods and education within vernacular national-type educational systems have led to a Malaysia divided – racial polarisation, lack of integration, and knowledge of 'other' cultures. The experience of QADIM reinforces Schechner's (2006, p. 306) viewpoint that '[w]hat is going on in this kind of intercultural performance is a negotiation whereby ideas and practices from both "inside" and "outside" a culture are sorted through, evaluated, interpreted, and reconfigured to suit complex, dynamic situations.'

It was deeply moving to hear stories and reflect on these meaningful memories that provided a window into the soul, and into the 'who and why' of the artist. The artist today is a sum total of his physical kinesthetic training and prior experience of the environment and upbringing. In the QADIM ensemble, this stretched geographically from Caracas, Venezuela to the agricultural settlement of FELDA<sup>12</sup> in Lok Heng Timor, Mersing, a small town in the southern state of Johor, and socio-economically from the upper-middle class to those from more humble beginnings. A constant danger during the project was the temptation to lean towards the exotic 'other' and fall into the trap of being orientalist even within Malaysia's own cultural context for example, being enraptured with the artist who grew up 'surrounded by oil palm trees'

As we developed movement phrases, sections of connectivity seemed to develop organically. The ensemble spent hours analysing the fragments and deciding how a logical cohesive progression could be developed that would give a sense of narrative to the total work. These sections had titles based on the emergent themes, which were: 1) Beginning; 2) Suffering; 3) Praying; 4) Stories; 5) Caring; and 6) Sharing. These titles were not particularly imaginative and were intentionally kept simple. The words were easily understood, quickly recalled during rehearsals with the potential to trigger memories and movements that were then explored in greater depth – adding, subtracting, amalgamating, dissecting, discarding and ultimately working towards creating sections that were satisfying in content and artistry. One of the most challenging aspects of this exercise was the removal or alteration of a section that the artist had initiated. It was understandable to become possessive of the sections that were individually significant and personally important. Ultimately, the democratic process led to acceptance and compromise. It was not painless but the artists were able to let go of personal points of view in the light of what was best for the collective big picture – the production.

## **The challenges of the Malaysian model**

The privilege of residency at the APPEX model with a commitment of six weeks made it clear that the most fundamental challenge in a non-resident collaborative creative process is that of conflicting schedules. Artists in Malaysia (and the world over) will attest to the need for accepting paid work. These ten artists were no different, where juggling Dhanya's commitments to full-time employment as a doctor in the nation's largest government hospital, Chih Pei's family and private dance school, Judimar's full-time employment and daughter, and prior commitments of Aris, Shafirul, Azizi and Ismadian with local productions while Umesh and Elaine had a performance in France, were among the factors that had to be placed on the negotiating table. In any collaborative model, it is crucial to create strategies that are effective and it is imperative to possess problem-solving skills. The consensus was that these issues could not be avoided. Finding rehearsal times that were least disruptive and making a commitment to attend whenever humanly possible was the path to follow. The method used to circumvent this potential minefield of a problem was organisation and identifying those artists with ideas about working in smaller groups. This extremely logical approach also diffused emotional conflict. And if an idea regarding the larger concept developed in these pocket rehearsals, no decisions would be made until everyone was present. This democratic approach required an extremely high level of patience and compromise, which was a lesson easier for some to learn than others who were more volatile. As Ito (2002, p.27) suggests: Whatever perspectives the artists brought to the collaboration, the process was continually under negotiation in term of artistic vision, process and final product.

The issue of time-management was less of a challenge than that of the artistic vision. It was a good example of Victor Turner's (1974, p. 261) theory of social drama that 'develops in four phases, one following the other: Breach-Crisis-Redressive Action-Reintegration or Schism.' Some of the initial discussions between the artists were heated as strong opinions proved to be time bombs waiting to explode. Some rehearsal sessions ended bitterly with nerves frazzled when the artists involved had opposing opinions about how the sections should be arranged, or how to distil the phrases of movement. Realising that nothing could be solved without discussion, the best course of action was to leave flaring tempers to cool over-night. Thoughts were then re-collected for the following session and because there was enough maturity to contemplate options, problems were overcome. Ultimately, the reintegration was rooted in the conviction that the ensemble was onto something worthwhile. This was enough not to simply put our differences aside, but rather to conscientiously find a solution that would create a better work of art.

Another consideration was the power inequity within the QADIM ensemble caused principally by two factors. The first was the span of age of 23 years similar to that of the APPEX program, but here there was a vast disparity in experience compounded by the deeply ingrained Asian philosophy of filial piety, deference to authority and seniority. This was exacerbated by the fact that many in the ensemble were not only older but the teachers of some of the others. Students as a practice would address their teachers by adding Mr, Sir,



Mrs, Miss, or in the Malay language, *Abang* (elder brother), *Pak* or *Bapak* (father), *Ibu* (mother) or *Lao Tze* which means teacher in Mandarin or *Anae*, elder brother in Tamil, and never refer to them by their first names. It was a great blessing to be a part of a team that displayed genuine warmth and humility to embrace the younger, less experienced artists and make them comfortable enough to be more assertive. The success of the process was testimony to this openness of the sharing of ideas from fresh young talent that was not present at the start of the process but rather grew with time. The second factor is the issue of linguistic imperialism that is common amidst all intercultural collaborations and was apparent in the APPEX model too. The ability to express oneself confidently automatically creates hierarchy. Although, this was a predominantly Malaysian ensemble, English was *lingua franca*, which immediately disadvantaged some primarily Malay-speaking members of the ensemble. Fortunately, there were enough bilingual speakers who then made the effort to also speak in Malay language whenever possible. This effort to be inclusive was clearly appreciated by those concerned and towards the final stages of rehearsal there was much discourse (and humour!) in both languages, with smatterings of Tamil, Cantonese, Korean, Hindi and Spanish thrown in for good measure.

## Conclusion

When the time for the performance came, we were devoid of stress and other familiar common pre-performance jitters and feelings. Calmness had descended upon the ensemble as we gathered in prayer for the last moments before descending onto the stage. We reminded each other that we were on a journey. This empty space was transformed into a shared shrine that was to be all embracing. It was a moment of transcendence that we became our mosques, churches, temples, dance studios, theatres or *tokongs*, as we were lifted beyond these structural symbols of our beliefs and faith. All artists felt that it was a spiritual experience that enveloped us. In this, our liminal state, we brought to the forefront of our minds all those who went before us. This became a moment in which we paid tribute and embodied our *gurus*, families, faith, beliefs, lives and each other. There were special moments in the performance where connections were made that had not been rehearsed, when tears flowed and when artists seemed to be 'there but not there'. This was a performance of 'restored behaviour' not primarily made for the gaze of the general audience present but perhaps unintentionally for the gaze of the divine. It was for those that went before us and those we felt who still watched over us. QADIM was for the people who had themselves shared similar experiences and journeys. The artists were onstage as a testament to those who had poured their knowledge into us, helped shape us and had blessed us on this path in the arts. It was clear that our body types and physical vessels were less important than our intention. Was it possible that the artists were in some form of trance or transitory state?

While in a trance, people are both relaxed and full of energy – a seemingly paradoxical condition. They are 'taken over' and / or experience a dissolution of boundaries between self and other, inner and outer.

(Schechner, 2006, p.193)



QADIM

Photo: Normalridzuan Kamarudin, ASWARA

Finally, at the end of the performance, a quiet peace fell upon us as we felt that we had participated in a rite of passage. The spontaneous *communitas* of the QADIM ensemble was perhaps the start of a journey and of seeing the path ahead more clearly. It was a liminal experience of introspection and connectivity. There was transformation more than transportation. QADIM led to the empowerment of the individual artist as self and the ensemble as one. This shared ownership was altogether more meaningful and powerful. QADIM can be summed up in the Universal Prayer taught by the late Swami Shantanand Saraswathi (1934-2005), founder of The Temple of Fine Arts to the Shiva family, that the ensemble decided was the perfect way to close the performance. The performers recited in random order, selected utterances or its entirety, as they simply walked away from the shared space of the Experimental Theatre at ASWARA in Malaysia that had for a moment in time, created a democracy, an equality between religious and personal practices.

O Adorable Lord of Mercy and Love...  
 Salutations and prostrations unto Thee  
 Thou Art Rama, Krishna, Shiva and Vishnu  
 Jesus and Allah, Buddha and Mahavira  
 Ahurmazda and Jehovah  
 Thou art Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient  
 Thou art Satchidananda  
 Thou art the indweller of All Beings  
 Grant us an understanding Heart,  
 Equal vision, Balanced Mind,  
 Faith, Devotion and Wisdom  
 Grant us inner spiritual strength  
 to resist temptations and to control the mind.

Free us from Egoism, Lust , Greed, Anger, Hatred and Jealousy  
Fill our Hearts with Divine Virtues  
Let us behold Thee in All these Names and Forms  
Let us serve Thee in All these Names and Forms  
Let us ever remember Thee  
Let us ever sing Thy glory  
Let Thy Name be ever on our lips  
Let us abide in Thee forever and ever  
HARI OM TAT SAT

## Appendix

**Judimar Hernandez:** Born in Caracas, Venezuela, this dancer, teacher and choreographer works primarily within western contemporary styles and has studied *bharata natyam*, yoga and other Asian forms.

**Elaine Pedley:** Elaine graduated with a First Class Honours degree in Performing Arts from the University of Malaya and is a facilitator, performer and choreographer in a wide range of genres, on stage, and for television and film both in Malaysia and international projects.

**Gan Chih Pei:** With a B.A. in Dance from University of Kansas, and principal of Centrestage Dance Academy and Dance Arts, Gan Chih has choreographed contemporary works in Thailand and Indonesia.

**Shafirul Azmi Suhaimi:** Firul is a graduate of ASWARA who has danced and choreographed traditional Malay forms, performed in major musical theatre performances in Malaysia and participated in international study programs.

**Ismadian Ismail:** A multi-talented singing dancing graduate of ASWARA, Ismadian's ability to combine traditions of *Makyung* theatre with contemporary and commercial productions makes her a much-sought after young talent in Malaysia.

**Umesh Shetty:** Began formal dance training at age six with his father, the late Master Gopal Shetty in *bharata natyam*, *odissi* and various folk styles of India. Umesh has a BA in Performing Arts in contemporary dance from Edith Cowan University and has choreographed at all major productions of the Temple of Fine Arts and ASWARA.

**Aris Kadir:** Multi-award winning performer and choreographer, Aris has performed in international festivals as a traditional *zapin* dancer with Yayasan Warisan Johor. A graduate of ASWARA he completed a year's study at Institut Kesenian Jogjakarta studying Indonesian dance styles.

**Azizi Sulaiman:** Holds a Diploma in Dance from ASWARA and performed in contemporary dance, commercials, and musical theatre and study programs in Australia, Singapore, Myanmar, New Zealand, India and Taiwan.

**Dhanya Thurairajah:** Dhanya is a graduate of the Temple of Fine Arts. Dancing *bharata natyam* from young age, she ventured into contemporary dance performances under the mentorship of Umesh Shetty completing a study program with Pandit Birju Maharaj, the grand master of *khatak* in India.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hindraf or Hindu Rights Action Force, made of 30 non-governmental organizations, conducted demonstrations that protested unfair treatment to minority Indians and even claimed 'ethnic cleansing'. This led to demonstrators being hauled away by police or sprayed with tear gas and subsequently arrested. Most were later released without being charged. In 1969, the first serious threat to racial harmony was experienced in violent and deadly clashes between rioters as a result of contested parliamentary elections in a predominantly Malay community of Kampung Baru or New Village in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. A national curfew and a state of emergency were declared for a brief period. These events eventually led to the resignation of Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the father of Independence. Other sporadic cases of racial unrest have been reported (usually not in the national press) of violence and vandalism on religious places of worship especially Hindu temples, such that a Hindu Temple Committee was needed to be set up to investigate these matters. In November 2008, this organisation was struck off the list of the Registrar of Societies, thus making it illegal.

<sup>2</sup> APPEX is a site of intercultural exchange that has supported the personal and professional growth of over 100 artists and writers. The program reinforces the value of each person's unique local practice while it also introduces artists to other like-minded individuals and promotes mutual understanding. - Judi Mitoma, Director, UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Judi Mitoma, Anuradha Kishore Ganpati, Marcia Argolo, Sabrina Rodriguez and Emiko Saraswati Susilo form The Centre of Intercultural Performance, UCLA with assistance by interns Janet Yau Wai Chi of Hong Kong and Max Moy-Borgen with Jorge Vismara as program photographer/documentation. APPEX was launched in 1996 and conducted at either UCLA or in Bali.

<sup>4</sup> National Arts Academy, established in 1994, was renamed the National Academy of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Malaysia in 2006. This tertiary arts education institution offers full-time diploma and degree-level programs in dance, music, theatre, writing and film and is now referred to by its acronym ASWARA.

<sup>5</sup> Suhaimi, Aida and Lena are artists who were instrumental in the establishment of ASWARA having trained in Indonesia and the United States of America and returned to Malaysia in that period of time.

<sup>6</sup> Refer Appendix for brief biodatas.

<sup>7</sup> Graduate of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts who together with Amy work extensively with the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Kwantung Association Youth Dance Group.

<sup>8</sup> *Choreography – a Malaysian Perspective* by Joseph Gonzales. ASK, KL. 2004

<sup>9</sup> Hindraf clashes and street demonstrations of November 9<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>10</sup> The modest funding was through the Faculty of Dance, ASWARA, Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage, Malaysia that paid for artists' token performance fees, a simple set, publicity material, digital recordings of the performance for DVD production, with the venue rental fee waived

<sup>11</sup> The New Economic Policy as a direct result of the racial riots of 1969, made for non-equitable distribution of goods, with education policies, business opportunities and allocations distributed along the racial composition of Malaysia that is roughly 60% to Malays (and variants), 30% to Chinese and 5% to Indians and 5% to the 'others'. Critics refer to this as legitimised apartheid while others refer to this as a model for working and dealing with a multicultural population. The term 'the special position of the Malays', appears twice, in Clause (1) and Clause (2) of Article 153, which is titled 'Reservation of quotas in respect of services, permits, etc. for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak'.

<sup>12</sup> Federal Land Development Authority, better known as FELDA is the foremost land development agency in Malaysia. FELDA was established on 1st July 1956 under the Land Development Act 1956 as a result of the recommendation of the Government Working Committee. FELDA was established with the purpose to help the government carry out rural land development schemes and to uplift the economic status as well as living standard of the rural community.

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## Biographical statement

Joseph Gonzales is Head of the Dance Faculty at the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage, ASWARA, Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, Malaysia. He is one of Malaysia's leading dance educators, a prolific and versatile choreographer, dance advocate, author, professional curator and a perennial student.