

Speech by Hijjas Kasturi, launching *Shaping the Landscape – Celebrating Dance in Australia and Sharing Identities – Celebrating Dance in Malaysia*

His Excellency Mr Miles Kupa, High Commissioner to Australia, Professor Mohd Anis Mohd Nor of the Cultural Centre at University Malaya, Ms Julie Dyson, National Director of Ausdance, and Ms Stephanie Burridge, series editor of these volumes.

Many thanks for your kind invitation to launch these two books about dance in Australia and Malaysia. I congratulate the authors and editors of both volumes on this considerable achievement.

As we all know, Malaysia and Australia have a long shared history, most of it good but some a little tense over political issues; but politics is like that, blowing hot and cold over concerns that have little real meaning to the links that ordinary people share between both countries. Australians served in Malaya during the Second World War, not a happy part of our shared history, but it created a strong emotional bond that led to a plan that was to me the greatest achievement in creating strong connections between us.

The Colombo Plan sent thousands of South East Asians to Australia to study in the '50s and '60s, and we all came back with valuable skills and filled with a sense of possibility that we could not have acquired any other way. We had lived with Australian families, we were often the first Asian students to come in contact with the general Australian community, and we all formed lasting ties together. Today so many Malaysians have the opportunity to study and live in Australia, but because there are so many of us there, it is very different for them ... it is no longer an experience of cultural immersion, but of merely gaining a formal education and enjoying Australia's good life, and I doubt that Australia affects them as much as it did me and my colleagues.

It is therefore gratifying to see that a new generation is shaping links today to supersede what we had then. The publication of these books and the conference that you are all attending indicate that our links are developing in different ways, principally through the arts and culture.

Australia has long used its culture as a diplomatic opener, and that is something Malaysia can do as well to ensure that its arts and performance are given the credit and place in society that they deserve.

I am stirred by the titles of both volumes, dealing with landscape and identities; these are both issues that I have pursued in my architectural career, as they are critical factors that combine to shape new cultures for new generations.

The formation of cultural exchange programs supported by Asialink at the University of Melbourne, and our own program at Rimbun Dahan, provide opportunities for creative Australians to live and work in Malaysia, reversing the Colombo Plan format, and filling a gap that will help us to work together in better ways. Other organisations like the Australia Malaysia Institute provide funding for events such as today's launch, and I thank them for that – I do hope that we can create smarter business partnerships between Malaysian and Australian companies to support creativity in both countries. As I said earlier, I again congratulate the editors and contributors to both these significant volumes that will help strengthen our ties and our creative links, and I am honoured to be invited here today to officiate at this launch.

Thank you.