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COVER STORY

# Show Time

Evanna Ramly



*The architecture recalls the sirih junjung and wau bulan*

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First constructed in 1995 and launched in 1999, Malaysia's national theatre, known as Istana Budaya, is the pride of the local performing arts scene. Spanning an impressive 54,400 sq m across its entire complex, with the theatre taking up 21,000 sq m of the space, the venue has seen a wealth of performances, from classical music and opera to Broadway musicals and plays. Some of its most memorable international productions include *Tosca*, *La Bohème* and *Turandot*.

The brainchild of Malaysian architect Muhammad Kamar Ya'akub, its design references the distinct moon kite or *wau bulan*, as well as the *sirih junjung*, a traditional arrangement of betel leaves used in Malay weddings and welcoming ceremonies. Its entrance beautifully replicates a palace's main hall, or Balairong Seri, said to be modelled after one in Melaka.

A visual treat, the theatre lobby is a grand extension of Malay culture, taking the shape of the *rebana ubi* or traditional drum. Inside the theatre hall poetically named Panggung Sari, royal boxes call to mind the intricately patterned windows of old-fashioned Malay houses.

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The interior was constructed using local resources such as Langkawi marble and tropical wood. Its doors were lovingly crafted by hand, featuring delicate motifs of flowers and leaves. Even the carpets showcase lush *cempaka* blossoms as well as the banyan tree, inspired by the traditional Malay opera or *Mak Yong*.

## Creating history

Able to accommodate more than 1,400 people, Istana Budaya is the first theatre in Asia to be equipped with some of the most state-of-the-art stage equipment. Instantly recognised by its sharp-angled turquoise roofs, it is also rated among the 10 most sophisticated theatres in the world, on par with London's Royal Albert Hall.

Over the decades, the interior was starting to show its age. In May last year, almost 20 years after it opened, physical work finally began on its renovation. Aziswan Zamin Abdul Aziz, director of Istana Budaya's technical department, believes it is long overdue for a theatre of its stature.

Lights throughout the lobby boast energy-efficient LED, which has reduced the entire theatre's electricity bill significantly by at least RM100, 000. Even the exit signs have been modernised, with sleek plates of glass in place of the outdated box shapes, again using LED to reduce carbon footprint.



*The aim is to place Istana Budaya in the top tier of theatre venues across the world, says Aziswan*

Improved lighting inside the theatre, to be completed latest by 2019, will not only change its look and feel but is also crucial in terms of maintenance. It will be far easier to see and appreciate its furnishing as well as the intricate carvings that decorate the wooden balconies.

Aziswan reveals that show design determines the type of stage lighting, whether it is par cans, moving head, profile, face or white balance.

With separate parts coming from different states across the country, all chairs are assembled in Istana Budaya itself. "We plan to increase the seating capacity from 1,412 to 1,460," mentions Aziswan.

One of the common complaints was that the original seats were too small. In addition, the measurements varied from 480mm to 490mm and 495mm in order to follow the curve of the stalls. Fit and comfort was a game of roulette for those not of average size.

The new seats are significantly wider and measurements have been standardised at 550mm in width. To replicate the curve, they are arranged at precise angles. "Larger-sized people like me will actually be able to sit directly on the cushion instead of feeling like we're floating above it," he laughs.



*Istana Budaya is one of the most sophisticated theatres in the world*

## **Now you see me**

Equally interesting are changes that will not be seen by the audience but nevertheless play an important role. For instance, the electrical devices such as transformers and switchgears.

Aziswan explains that the six transformers operate a multitude of systems, from the stage's 117 point hoists and 69 fly bars to the lighting and lifts. The device is also responsible for the building's power.

The under stage's mechanism bids farewell to the rack and pinion system in favour of gears in linear actuator. Aziswan compares its speed to that of a person climbing a flight of stairs, and welcomes the new rigid chain system, which can raise platforms faster and smoother. "Back then, we could only run the stage at 80mm per second. Now we can go up to 300mm per second."

Over stage, the patching system has been replaced with the multi-drive system. For the former, Aziswan provides the analogy of a dual-SIM phone, the control of which depends on the user's choice of SIM card. The new system, however, is likened to multiple phones driven by individual SIM cards.

This system ensures seamless processing of commands. With the patching system, time is wasted when a crew member is asked to choose a SIM card, so to speak. The one-to-one approach of the multi-drive system sees devices controlled more efficiently.

According to Aziswan, the response time may not be easily perceived by the audience but it makes a huge difference backstage. “We’re talking a second or even a millisecond so you won’t notice it. But it’s always a mad rush during a show and you need to make everything look seamless.”

The upgraded system has also increased the fly bar speed from 1,000mm per second to 1,500mm per second, tested with a load of one tonne. Think lightning-fast backdrop changes, which are crucial for major productions that may require that sort of speediness.

“The aim is to place Istana Budaya in the top tier of theatre venues across the world. A staging of *The Phantom of the Opera*, for instance, necessitates fly bars that move at a minimum of 1,500mm per second. We have now met that technical requirement.”



*The new chairs are more spacious and luxurious*

## **Hear me roar**

Then there are the new EV speakers, which promise far more superior sound quality. “We’ve also upgraded our recording studio and switched from Midas analog audio mixer to a digital model from Yamaha,” Aziswan continues. “Besides that, the old CRT TVs in the dressing rooms have been swapped with more advanced LED screens.”

Pivotal to the theatre’s security system is the upgrade of its CCTV. More cutting-edge cameras have been added – bringing the total to 45 – and footage from all can now be viewed simultaneously via larger monitors in the security room.

“Back then we only had 32 cameras and eight TVs. If anything happened, we might miss it,” he says, adding that the technology used was from 1995 and the recording required tapes that are no longer in production. “Now it’s all digital and security inside the auditorium has also been improved with Telex technology.”

Future plans include painting and revamping the roof, perhaps with dazzling LED lights for mood lighting to highlight performances. A planned upgrade to the building’s chiller system will make it greener in practice.

“At the moment, we’re using four chillers in addition to two cooling towers but should we switch to a more energy-efficient chiller, we will not need four of them. One of the reasons why we pay so much for air-conditioning is because we need it round the clock.”

Few are aware that the prized musical instruments of Orkestra Tradisional Malaysia and Orkestra Simfoni Kebangsaan are kept inside Istana Budaya. From violins and pianos to rebana, gendang and kompang, all require storage with controlled humidity. Changes in humidity will not only affect the sounds produced by the instruments but also pose a threat to their condition as the strings and leathers expand and contract.

“We also have the costumes to protect from mold and mildew,” Aziswan adds. “Authentic vintage pieces such as those seen in Bukit Kepong from the 1940s and 1950s need great care.”

As much as he admires the theatre’s unique architecture, he admits its maintenance can be challenging. “Because of the landscaping that surrounds it, even a simple change of spotlight or roof tile calls for a crane that can reach 30 storeys, which can cost RM10,000 a day to rent. And you can’t simply park any crane right next to the building because that would destroy the landscaping.”

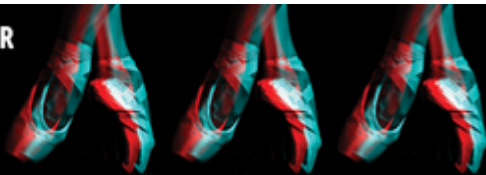
So far, RM62mil has been spent on the renovations. Aziswan estimates the cost will escalate to RM250mil for the overall refurbishment. It may sound like a lot but to put it into perspective, the Sydney Opera House recently spent AU\$200mil (about RM630mil) upgrading its stage system alone.

“There is definitely a lot of money involved but it’s important to promote new talents,” he says, citing Erma Fatima, Hans Isaac, Afdlin Shauki and Puan Sri Tiara Jacquelina as some of Malaysia’s brightest stars who have honed their theatrical craft at Istana Budaya.

Hopefully, the entire space will be completely refurbished in time for its 20th anniversary in 2019. “This building has lasted two decades. To make it last another 20 years and beyond, a lot of work still needs to be done,” Aziswan says.

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