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MUSE

Winds of Desire

Evanna Ramly



The performers of *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* – Courtesy of Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre

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This year, The Actors Studio Seni Teater Rakyat marries the language of Shakespeare with the mysticism of Mak Yong. Under the direction of Norzizi Zulkifli, *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* retells *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through one of the country's oldest art forms.

"In the beginning, I had two options: whether to put *Mak Yong* in Shakespeare or Shakespeare in *Mak Yong*, to present Shakespeare with a slight *Mak Yong* sense, or the other way around," says Norzizi, who would perform herself if not for the fact that she is heavily pregnant. "I decided to take Shakespeare's story but when you see it, you will feel like you're watching *Mak Yong*. Some of Shakespeare's language I have tried to retain, mixed with the Kelantanese dialect for more flavour."

For Norzizi, the beauty of *Mak Yong* lies in its multitude of elements from dancing to singing and acting. "It's hard to describe but the moment I hear the traditional instruments start to play, I delve into the whole feeling of it. I think the exchange between the audience and

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Norzizi melds Shakespeare with the traditional art

the actors is very hard to explain but some of it is down to angin.”

Angin is a term that is widespread in regional culture and Norzizi feels it has a lot to do with desire. “It’s what brings out in you the capability to become a certain character. When you hear the music and you can’t resist joining in the dance, that’s your inner soul drawn to it.”

Her connection to *Mak Yong* is due to her own emotions towards its sounds, dance and language, which is highly classical and has a certain melody. Then there is the distinct music that calls to her.

“Rebab or spiked fiddle is the main anchor, accompanied by the *gendang ibu*, *gendang anak*, *gong*, *canang*, *kesi* and *geduk*. For *Mak Yong Titis Sakti*, we will also be incorporating modern instruments to give it a contemporary touch.”

Historical theatre

Norzizi suspects that the ban imposed by the Kelantanese government on *Mak Yong* in the 1990s has made people want to know more about it. Little doubt this show would also pique the curiosity of those who are new to the art.

“No one knows the true origin of *Mak Yong*,” says Eddin Khoo, founder and director of Pusaka. Established in 2002, the non-governmental organisation is dedicated to supporting the viability of traditional Malaysian art forms.

Some believe *Mak Yong* is a harvest ritual that predates Islam with elements particular to Southeast Asia, the focus on women being of special interest. “It adapted over time and embraced various defining features that have shaped Malays.”

He adds that while some say it comes from Jawa, it is distinct to the Kelantan-Pattani region and its mythology. Of the 12 stories that are remembered, only four or five are still practised today including the tales of *Dewa Muda*, *Dewa Pencil* and *Anak Raja Gondang*.

Recently, Pusaka embarked on a year-long *Mak Yong* Community Empowerment and Cultural Heritage Project, documenting the performances of Kumpulan *Mak Yong Cahaya Matahari* in Kuala Besut, Terengganu. The troupe is the family and descendants of the legendary *Mak Yong* actress, the late Che Ning.



Khoo is fascinated by the art and its relationship with the performers

Forbidden art

According to Khoo, *Mak Yong* was banned mainly because it involves women and has pre-Islamic origins. In addition, the stories have erotic elements to them, while the humour is bawdy and rowdy.

"It's nonsense and part of a very puritan approach to culture that is a new phenomenon, not a traditional problem," he laments. "When you divest communities of their culture, you do not give them a voice for any kind of solidarity.

Khoo points out that it can be very hard to talk about authentic forms of art as *Mak Yong* and all traditional Malay art forms are oral. "It's not fixed or codified so it allows a lot of room for expansion, improvisation and experimentation."

He is fascinated by these art forms and their relationship with the performers. "It is not that performers perform an art form; performers learn an art form for reasons of personality so the art form is also shaped according to their personality. In *Mak Yong*, you can have 10 different actors with 10 different styles and 10 different preferences of stories, and it is authentic to themselves. It's about how the art cultivates personality and how their personalities influence the art."

I am woman

Because traditional oral art forms rely heavily on personality, wit, intelligence, improvisation and speed of thought, the difference between generations resulting from its lack of practice has not been missed. Evidently, there is much that the young women of today can learn from history, their ancestors and traditional art forms like *Mak Yong* that strongly emphasise the role of women in society.

"I find that if you ask many of our young women what they know about the history of women in this country, they know nothing. They cannot speak about it, about gender and sexuality through the centuries – they just don't have that kind of knowledge," says Khoo.

"Essentially, the things they say are borrowed feminist models. Their lexicon is rooted in the language of rites and they have no experience of their own. More importantly, whatever they adopt in terms of knowledge and what women should be is not applied to a specific cultural context. We are quarrelling now about issues that had been answered by our cultures and societies for a long time."

Collective healing

Communities have always allowed the art form to thrive because there is still a need for it; many believe they can be healed by its power to release suppressed energies. "It's a theatre of yearning. At its root, it's for the well-being of individuals and community. Young people are very curious, restless and looking for a positive release of energy," says Khoo.

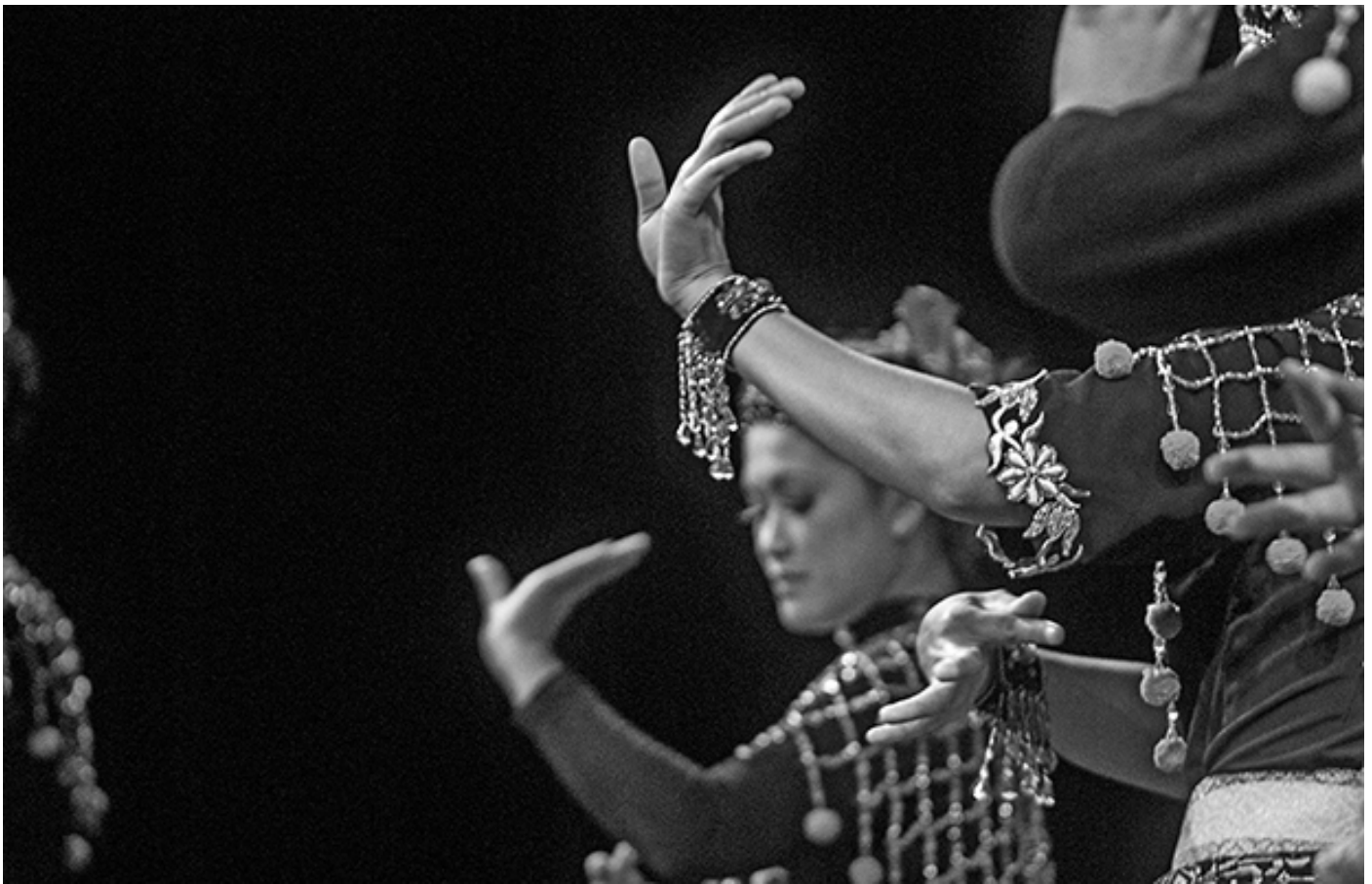
Sadly, many people are not aware of or refuse to acknowledge Mak Yong's metaphorical dimensions. "They refuse to take the art for what it is and instead impose what are essentially moralistic, legalistic and theocratic ideas on something that is a lot more elusive and fluid so the mind becomes very frigid."

"In the end, everything that is substantial, difficult and deep like *Mak Yong* will suffer because we just don't have time. We look at things like this as quaint and don't even believe in any of the things it advocates – soul, spirit, strength and beauty."

Free your mind

The acknowledgement of how difficult and complex a human being can be is the most important lesson Khoo has learnt from close to 30 years of working with Mak Yong practitioners. "You go into the depths of its psychology, methods, musicality, the confluence between movement, speech, music, emotional states – it's all still there."

Most importantly, he surmises, is that by talking about Mak Yong, people begin to realise how little they know about themselves, the culture from which they come from and what has been happening for the past 30 years. "Let's be open to our ignorance, to how little we know and how much there is to discover, to a great many surprises about what our culture and history has concealed from us and to our own diversity as well."



Kumpulan Mak Yong Cahaya Matahari

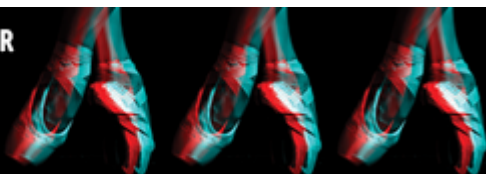
Modern magic

For those unable to venture deep into the villages of Terengganu and Kelantan, *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* is a start. When asked why she decided to perform Shakespeare's beloved romantic comedy, Norzizi replied, "We're living in the real world yet we continue to watch films with supernatural elements. As human beings, we still believe in magical powers."

"Some may reject such fantasies because they don't reflect real life but at some point, we don't want to see real life with all its problems. We still want to have a mix of fantasy and reality," she smiles. "Sometimes reality can be a form of therapy but it's the beauty of magic that we want. We cannot forget that sometimes magical things happen to us."

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