

stage/

IT'S the 1980s and in Stadium Dato' Syed Omar, Alor Setar, a man performs an Indian classical dance at the invitation of the Sultan of Kedah. In the audience is a little girl eagerly explaining to her astounded father every one of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu that the dancer is performing.

When it ends, the little girl sighs and prays she will get to see this dance again soon. Today, the stadium no longer exists, the little girl's all grown up and the dancer is now a celebrated icon known to all as Datuk Ramli Ibrahim. When I tell him that I was that little girl, Ramli exclaims: "But darling, that was more than 30 years ago!"

With a broad smile, the multiple award-winning artiste insists that my story is another example of how well he connects with children. As the chairman of Sutra Foundation, he's created a strong bank of new talents from his outreach programme which offers dance training to children from Kajang and Ladang Sungai Choh in Selangor.

These children will be showcasing some of what they've learnt at an upcoming Indian classical production called *Amorous Delight*.

POINT OF EMBARKATION

The story of this production began close to 10 years ago when Ramli was presented with a copy of a manuscript called *Amorous Delight*.

Published by Museum Rietberg Zurich (2006), it was collaboratively written by Eberhard Fischer and Dinanath Pathy. In the manuscript, there are magnificent palm leaf illustrations by an unknown master engraver hailing from the Nayagrah district of Odisha. These illustrations are based on the 9th-century *Amarushataka*, a Sanskrit anthology of 100 short verses. A complete tapestry on the sense of belonging, these verses display the entire spectrum of the experience of love, in intense poetic language.

Calling this manuscript "the point of embarkation", Ramli says that he saw its potential as a lyrical dance production.

Eager to showcase this, Ramli chose the Indian classical dance of Odissi to interpret the handful of verses from the manuscript. As Odissi is a classical dance



A DELIGHTFUL EMBRACE OF FASHION IN DANCE

Two Malaysian icons combine their talents to create something breathtakingly unique, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

from eastern India, Ramli feels that it exposes his dancers to lifelong virtues such as discipline, commitment to self and also, as participating members of a group or community.

At that moment, Bobby, Ramli's Labrador retriever makes an entrance and the 64-year-old dancer breaks into a broad smile. "This dog is like a Buddha," he says. "He brings calmness into the household."

Duly petted, the dog moves away to welcome the person who makes Ramli's present staging of *Amorous Delight* particularly fascinating, Datuk Sri Bernard Chandran.

After introductions are made, Ramli confides that it has been a pleasure to work with one as professional as Bernard. He appreciates the fact that the celebrated fashion designer did in-depth research for this project. Quietly, Bernard smiles and clarifies this by saying: "Sometimes, it's better not to know too much. Basic knowledge is good enough."

As Bernard elaborates on the efforts he's made, it's obvious there's a ring of truth to Ramli's earlier statement. Indeed, other than studying the illustrations from the manuscript, Bernard also used his innate knowledge of Hindu mythology to under-

\stage



stand that, at its most basic, the dancers need to look sensual and romantic.

The next challenge Bernard faced was the issue of how to make clothes for people who generally have body shapes different to the ones he's used to working with. While the women on the catwalk are generally thin, the dancers tend to be voluptuous.

"Their shape," he adds, "is busty with a small waist and big hips." This can become more pronounced with some costumes, such as the ones made from Kanjipuram sans with their heavy silk fabric. To make the dancers appear soft and sensual, Bernard adds delicate fabrics such as chiffon to these.

Determined to put the Malaysian stamp on his works, Bernard also uses other elements such as belts and sequined patterns to portray the Malay heritage.

ALL ABOUT THEATRE

Will all these resonate with the dance itself? Particularly when it's based on a passage like Verse 74 from the Amarushataka which, when translated into English, reads:

"Alone with him in the solitary bed chamber, the young wife lifted herself up slowly and feasted her eyes on the adorable face of her lord, who feigned deep sleep. But as she kissed his face, she was surprised at the thrill of his cheeks and bent down her head abashed. Laughing out loud, her husband kissed her long."

A pictorial representation of this scene appears in a poster for last year's production of *Amorous Delight*. Although the costumes are opulent and the jewellery lavish, the issue was if it properly reflected the simplicity of dress people would wear in a bed chamber.

Pursing his lips, Bernard leans forward and says: "Well, there needs to be some glamour. That's what people want to see. It's theatre." As a concession to the informality of the scene, the 48-year-old father of five says that he'll probably look at the accessories the dancers wear or even suggest that they wear their hair loose rather than in a tight bun.

"I allowed him to push the boundaries," interjects Ramli. The rationale of so doing ties in with Ramli's approach to dance which is based on two major philosophical and

literary principles from Greek mythology — the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. In Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysius were the sons of Zeus. Apollo represents order, predictability and stability. Dionysius is all about chaos, instability and surprise. Throughout his career, Ramli has tried to strike a balance between these two principles.

From experience though, Ramli is aware that he can only go so far for there was a time when he was chastised for not adhering to certain rules of costume, such as omitting to wear something called the Ordhi during a performance.

All said and done, both men are determined to express themselves as freely as possible. In fact, Ramli reminds me that he always strives to "speak the language of dance". This he calls *rasa*.

"In dance, learning what the *shloka* (a couplet of Sanskrit verse) means isn't as wonderful as learning what the *shloka* is imagined as [When I dance], I identify with my own spirit first, then the audience." In so doing, the onlooker, be it a little girl or even royalty, becomes secondary to Ramli's dance.

Both men hope that with *Amorous Delight*, they can transcend controversies that may generate from those who are unnecessarily puritanical.

"I allowed him (Bernard Chandran) to push the boundaries."

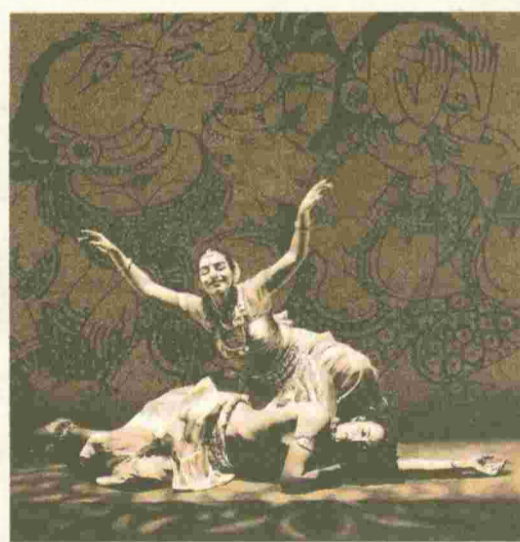
Ramli Ibrahim



Clockwise from extreme top left: Students from Sutra's outreach programme; Bernard giving his unique touch to the costumes; Bernard sketching his designs. PHOTOS BY S MAGENDRAN



Discussion between Ramli and Bernard.



Amorous Delight

Where: Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Jalan Ipoh, Sentul, KL
When: March 15 to 19, 2017
Website: www.sutrafoundation.org.my