

tête-à-tête @ 10



Our living treasure

DANCER and choreographer Datuk Ramli Ibrahim, 63, has been at the forefront of dance in Malaysia for more than 30 years. The talented proponent of Indian classical dance, in particular, Odissi, is also trained in ballet and modern dance.

In 1983, Ramli started the Sutra Dance Theatre and close to 25 years later, he launched the Sutra Foundation and is its chairman.

Ramli has been bestowed many awards, including the Fulbright Distinguished Artist 1999 and the Lifetime Achievement Award at the

Malaysian Boh Cameronian Arts Awards 2003 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award 2011. In 2012, he was acknowledged as a Living Heritage by the government and was declared a Unesco Living Treasure.

Most recently, Sutra Foundation spearheaded by Ramli presented *Ganjam*, a massive Odissi production which was one of its most challenging dance works. It was first presented in September last year as one of the highlights of the month-long DiverseCity 2015 and again, last month.

Aneeta Sundararaj

living PLUSH BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE&TIMES

1 YOU HAVE MET SO MANY ARTISTS, DANCERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS THROUGHOUT YOUR CAREER. WHO'S THE ONE PERSON YOU'LL NEVER FORGET AND WHY?

Actually, there are two: Indrani Rahman and Ram Gopal. I met both in the 1980s in New York. Indrani, the first Miss India, helped to popularise Indian classical dance in the west and later settled in New York. Ram was an Indian dancer and choreographer who blended classical Indian dance with ballet.

2 WHO HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST INFLUENCE AND WHY?

James Murdoch. He's my mentor. He was a generous man with a sense of humour. He made me appreciate good writing and western music. There was always something fresh with him. (James Murdoch, a dance researcher and writer, was the first National Director of the Australian Music Centre.)

3 IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE GOING TO A DESERTED ISLAND AND YOU'RE ONLY ALLOWED TO TAKE THREE THINGS WITH YOU. WHAT WOULD THESE BE AND WHY?

This is a naughty question. The one thing I won't take is a book. I'll take sunglasses. Well, I have to survive. I'll definitely not take a hand-phone. Maybe some sunstroke medicines. Second, I'll take a companion. It doesn't have to be a human companion. An animal will be fine. I relate to (the story of) *Life Of Pi* very much. Finally, I'll take music. Classical music. Both Indian and Western classical music. No modern music, but maybe some landmark pieces. I do like the Beatles very much.

4

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE WORD IN THE ENGLISH DICTIONARY AND WHY?

Well, it's a four-letter word. Food. But good quality food. I don't necessarily go for quantity. I want good quality food.

5

WHAT'S THE THREE HUMAN TRAITS YOU DEPLORE IN PEOPLE AND WHY?

The first is cruelty to animals. Now we have this great paradox where we have to kill animals for food. But, I have fish in my pond but I can't kill and eat them.

The second is a lack of generosity and not wanting to help others. In dance, I want to be generous with my knowledge. When I know that there's someone who doesn't want to give, I get nauseated.

The third is bigotry and absolutism where only one person is right and another's opinion isn't. I also appreciate true compassion. Someone like Sivananda or Mother Theresa, who were almost unconditional in their compassion.

6 WHAT'S THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT YOU?

That I've got it easy. That dancers lead a glamorous life. I've had people say, "Don't worry. Ramli just floats around. Everything is easy for him".

7

BEST RUMOUR SPREAD ABOUT YOU.

That I was given a sports car by Rockefeller. But I like to tease people such as Faridah Merican. She has such an innocence about her. Once I left a message for her, "Faridah, I'm in Tawakkal (KPJ Tawakkal Specialist Hospital). Call me now!"

8 WHICH PERIOD OF HISTORY WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO BACK TO AND WHY?

If I could, I want to be born Javanese. They have a major culture that I identify with. Another period of time I'd like to go back to is early 20th century Paris. The Russian ballet at the time. It was before the First World War and all the artistes were weird. You were not an artiste if you weren't eccentric.

9

WHILE INDIA IS INCREDIBLE IN SO MANY WAYS, IT'S NOT AN EASY PLACE FOR VISITORS. WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE LIVING AND STUDYING IN INDIA AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

When I was there, it was the late 1970s. At that time, food and water were a little difficult. But not anymore. Now, two or three days before I return, I can drink the water and don't need to take only bottled water.

10

OTHER THAN ENGLISH AND BAHASA MALAYSIA, WHAT OTHER LANGUAGE(S) DO YOU SPEAK? HOW DID YOU LEARN THEM?

French. A little bit. I spent a year in Odisha and by the end of that year, I could make out the script. But not anymore. Now, everyone speaks English.