

# Contemporary Malay Dance in Singapore – Riding the Waves of Change

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Malay dance in Singapore has evolved dramatically since the birth of the nation in 1965. However, Malay dance itself has a long history stretching back hundreds of years in the Malay Archipelago with Arabic and Portuguese influences shaping the various dances over the centuries. This research aims to capture the moment when the paradigm shift occurred and the subsequent transformation of the Malay dance scene in Singapore. One of the aims of this research is to record the evolution of Malay dance for the preservation of Malay cultural heritage as part of Singapore's history for future generations. As the researchers try to record the paradigm shifts that have taken place in Malay traditional arts, the researchers are reminded of the centuries of unwritten history that have been inherited from our forefathers. This tradition of the oral dissemination of history could have been the reason why important milestones in the Malay traditional and performing arts have not been recorded and are difficult to trace. There is now a sense of urgency to record the plethora of evidence of shifts and movement in Malay dance in Singapore which plays a vital role in the nations' cultural landscape. It is hoped this article could be an impetus for the social recapitalization of Malay traditional arts in Singapore. This article, "Contemporary Malay Dance in Singapore – Riding the Waves of Change" is an extract from a study by the same researchers about the "History of Malay Dance In Singapore." This article specifically demonstrates a paradigm shift in the 1980's which was the period of change for Malay Dance in Singapore. It also highlights some of the problems that have arisen in relation to change and growth.

**Key words:** *Contemporary Malay Dance, Preservation, History, Singapore.*

## Introduction

Malay dance in Singapore has evolved dramatically since the birth of the nation in 1965. However, Malay dance has never enjoyed the high status and admiration received and linked to practitioners of other ethnic dances, especially Indian dancers. This is probably because in the early days, Malay dance is seen as mere entertainment and its presence is only as fillers or extra turns, always the fringe and never the main event (Kadir & Ariffin, 2019).

This study looks at the different perspectives held by practitioners and supporters of Malay dance in Singapore. The researchers will look at the development of the three Malay dance categories: Traditional Dance, New Creation Dance, and Contemporary Malay Dance. Within the Traditional Dance category there are 5 basic dance genres: Asli, Masri, Inang, Joget and Zapin. This study looks at the paradigm shifts and changes in the 1980's as well as the conflicts they bring out, especially in contemporary Malay dance. This encompasses the change in thinking, attitudes and behaviours among the choreographers, dancers and the audience. A deeper focus on dance features, techniques, and style will also be presented. From this study, the researchers hope to contribute to the development of Malay dance in Singapore.

## The Paradigm Shift of Malay Dance in Singapore in the 1980s

Singapore Malay dance has grown from a typical traditional dance in the 1960s and emerged in the 1980s into a Singapore Malay dance identity that depicts everyday life (*Berita Harian* on September 15, 1989). Malay dance icon, Madam Som Said, pointed out that the Malay dance in the 1980s was no longer based on the conservativeness of the Malays, but was far more liberal, broad, and challenging. The dances of the 1980s conveyed more of the feelings and thoughts of the choreographer (*Berita Harian*, January 4, 1988).

An example to illustrate the Malay dance situation in the 1980s was the Malay Cultural Night performance at Victoria Theatre on December 9, 1983. Only one out of ten dance items performed by the eight groups was an original Malay dance piece, namely, the Perwira Tanjung Puteri performed by Hamid Dancers. The rest were either new creations or contemporary dance performances that had a rather fast tempo. These included Rentak Riang (Sriwana), Tari Anikaria (Siglap Community Centre), Tari Senandung Irama (Perkumpulan Seni), Tarian Payang (Rina Dance Group), Taridra Jebat (Sriwana), Tudung Saji (River Valley Community Centre), Puteri Payung (Stamford Community Centre), Senandung Kipas (National Theatre Club Dancers) and Taridra Ratu (National Theatre Club Dancers) which was a dance drama based on a legend.

The development of Malay dance towards a more dynamic and creative era in the 1980s was supported by international festivals and dance exchange programs which discussed various

ideas in improving the quality and standard of Malay dance in Singapore. This provided the necessary impetus and became the source of future dance festivities (*Berita Harian*, January 4, 1988). One such programme was held at the Bagong Kussudiardja Center for the Arts. A dance programme was organised under the auspices of the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dance instructors who have benefitted from such programmes included Mdm. Som Said, Mr. Naim Pani and Mdm. Safarina.

However, according to Osman Hamid (Interview with Osman Hamid, 2018). The real shift was during the production of Gemala Tari for the Singapore Festival of Arts, 1984. Osman describes the evening's production as one that impacted the Malay dance circle in Singapore. Nongchik Ghani invited two established choreographers from Institute Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ) or the Jakarta Arts Institute. These choreographers were Tom Ibnur - the master of Minangkabau dance and Noerdin Daud - the master of Aceh dance. Not only were the local dancers taught about Minangkabau and Aceh dance, they even had the opportunity to witness the fusion of the two dance forms. The production sparked new creative ideas and opened up new possibilities amongst the emerging choreographers who were dancing for the production. Gemala Tari is special because it is the first significant attempt at injecting new life into Malay dance in Singapore. The two Malay dance experts brought in for the production were able to share their vast experience and knowledge to make Gemala Tari different from any other Malay dance production that Singapore audiences have seen (*The Straits Times*, June 19, 1984).

According to Naim Pani, Singapore Malay dance in 1988 had a sharp contrast to Malay dances in the 1960s and 1970s. Singapore's Malay dance was no longer 'go-ahead' 'left-to-right,' 'V-line' or 'diagonal' usually found in Malay dance in the past decade (*The Straits Times*, September 19, 1988). Some of these changes were due to the added proficiency of the dance choreographers. For example, Fauziah Hanom admits that she inadvertently inserts ballet elements into the Malay dance she choreographs (Interview with Fauziah Hanom, 2018). During her active choreographing days, she has seen how dancers from various backgrounds such as Western, jazz, and hip hop are keen to learn Malay dance from Indonesian instructors. In fact, at one point, there was a strong influence of Javanese dance, which was then incorporated into the Malay dance either consciously or unconsciously (Interview with Fauziah Hanom, 2018).

### **Current Trends in Malay Dance**

There is a paradox in the current development of Singapore Malay dance. On the one hand, there is development in a more contemporary direction, and at the same time, there are others in the Malay dance circle who believe in a more traditional approach to development. The same paradox is also present in the music accompanying the dance. On the one hand, the music develops and becomes more creative with many new musical compositions edited and mixed

from pre-recorded dance tracks. On the other hand, there is an increased interest in using live music and traditional acoustic instruments to accompany the dance. According to Hanim Mohd Saleh, in the past, most Malay dances were performed with recorded music. Since the 1990s, Malay dance music was played live, similar to the era where there were no electronic recording devices (Interview with Hanim Mohd Saleh, 2018).

In the past, the emphasis was on conveying the meaning of stories told from local Malay wisdom, which sometimes seems detached from everyday life, such as folklore, fairy tales, and myths. Presently, the meaning in Malay dance is grounded in everyday life. Initially, Singapore Malay dances portrayed the life in rural areas and suburbs of the Singaporean Malay community with more realistic emotional expressions, such as love, sadness, and disappointment, as well as spiritual expressions such as prayer and the human relationship with God (Interview with Hanim Mohd Saleh, 2018). Malay dance today portrays the urban life of the Singaporean Malay community with its controversy and dynamism. Zapin, in the past, focused on footwork and the lower body. Today, choreographers use more complicated upper and lower body movements, even acrobatics are infused to provide the "wow" factor in the dance. Similarly, for other dance genres, the choice is to move from slow graceful dances, which does not produce much sweat, into vibrant, fast-paced and expressive dance movements.

### **Features of Malay Contemporary Dance in Singapore**

It is important to note that over the last 10 years, leaders from the main dance groups who are also members of the Singapore Malay Dance Committee (SMDC) agree that three main dance genres exist in Singapore. Traditional dance, new dance creations, and contemporary dance. The concept of Malay contemporary dance has a different meaning from the contemporary concept of Western dance. Master choreographer Tom Ibnur, also fondly known as Pak Tom, who is *guru* to many established choreographers in Singapore and the region, distinguishes between traditional dance, new dance creations, and contemporary dance. According to Ibnur, new dance creations are traditional dances that undergo minor changes. It can be said that the new dance creations are new dances but with old systems and rules. Contemporary dance is radical. It completely abandons old systems and rules by raising personal ideas from various aspects of the dance (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018).

New dance creations and contemporary dance have similarities where they contain new components compared to traditional dance. The contemporary concept comes from the development of the arts in America. Contemporary dance is a genre developed in the mid-twentieth century which draws from classical ballet, modern dance, and jazz. It is especially popular in the U.S. and Europe. However, the development of contemporary dance in the United States did not receive an immediate response in the East. The development of arts in Asia tends to be more persistent and incremental.

The rapid development of world dance was due to increased creativity and better education which resulted in more liberal and forward thinking. As interest in contemporary dance grew in both Indonesia and Singapore, attempts were made by choreographers to imitate what was happening in the United States. However, concerns about the loss of the Malay identity in dance, which is an identity that has been passed down for generations, was also strong. Such fundamental thoughts came about gradually after people have a better understanding of traditional dance and then acceptance of new dance creations (*kreasi baharu*) before supporting Malay contemporary dance works (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018).

Western contemporary dance features, according to Tom Ibnur, have a philosophical foundation of liberalism (freedom). Tradition was left out of contemporary dance, so traditional dance (folklore) was not a source for creation, but more of an example of what not to do. The contemporary choreographers in Singapore were continually trying to find links with traditional dance to ensure the sanctity of Malay dance is preserved. This search resulted in a wide range of "explorative" works as each choreographer is driven and motivated differently. Both types of dance then grew on their own with distinct features. Folk dance, or traditional Malay dance as it is called, is very much alive, as is contemporary dance (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018). Another feature of Western contemporary dance is the relevance to modern life. The contemporary dance creations are rooted in the everyday experience of urban and global societies. For example, agricultural themes no longer appear, but are replaced by themes such as technology or outer space. Instruments and movements displayed are also freer and depicts modernization. Many take advantage of electronic instruments instead of acoustic instruments.

Although contemporary Malay dance concepts are radical, these concepts are not considered radical in Western contemporary dance. Contemporary Malay dance is still based on tradition, but has more new elements than new creations works. The main features of Contemporary Malay dance are the core values portrayed in the dance. While telling a story is the norm in traditional dance and new dance creations, contemporary dances stand on ideas and concepts. This approach becomes an issue as the Malay audience has been accustomed to story-based dance. As a result, the audience becomes less familiar and eventually do not enjoy the performance and worse still, they get bored (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018).

Azmi Juhari has the same view on the characteristics of contemporary dance that prioritizes the ideas above. According to Juhari, contemporary dance is a dance laden with symbolism. A significant aspect of the dance is abstract, requiring some thinking in order to understand, thus making contemporary dance challenging to understand by majority of audiences (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018). This does not mean that traditional Malay dance has no symbolism. Embodying philosophy in Malay dance is a quality signifier. However, contemporary dance plays with newer and more complex ideas. For example, choreographer Salleh Buang uses

visualisation of a wall to describe road blocks, hindrances, or barriers (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018). Use of symbols is inherent in dance. Given the limitations of the stage and the restrictions of aesthetics and ethics may lead to more complicated symbols used in the dance.

Currently, prominent proponents of Malay contemporary dance in Singapore are the likes of choreographers Osman Abdul Hamid and Azmi Juhari. Both are raising ideas about everyday life, just like in new dance creations. However, they have yet to fully let-go of the old rules. Tom Ibnur observes that even though Osman Abdul Hamid creates contemporary dance, he is still unable to move away from *Silat* characteristics and to speak of nature. It still contains old stories that portray old things (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018). The challenges faced by Singapore's Malay contemporary dance in order to be able to flourish not only lies in the eyes of the audiences, but also on the part of the choreographers with whom there seems to be an internal conflict. This conflict arises because choreographers are uncertain about what they are doing, whether it is traditionally acceptable. Tom Ibnur says, he also feels the same when trying to create contemporary dance. The mental load of working with the constraints of tradition and trying to create a contemporary piece is very real.

The next challenge is how to keep the contemporary dance alive but still bear the Malay identity. It is also a concern for Som Said. Som noticed that many new dancers are eager to show contemporary dance while they have yet to master traditional dance basics such as Inang, Masri, Joget (*Berita Harian*, January 4, 1988). Azmi Juhari discussed the abstract meanings of props used in dance like the hoe (*cangkul*) used in *Akar Subur* 2018. Also watching the show was Osman Abdul Hamid. At the show, the dancers utilized the props in an “obscene” manner that is not in line with the collective Malay tradition. Similarly, the meaning of the hoe becomes unclear. One part of the dance choreography requires the men to hold the hoe at the handles, and the women hold the blade portion of the hoe then, the two parts joined together to symbolize a heart-to-heart connection. In terms of its traditional meaning, the whole concept is incorrect because the hoe is a symbol of the power of the land, not love (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018).

The selection of dance costume is an essential part of Malay dance. The relevance between costumes and dance moves is part of the quality of Malay dance. According to Tom Ibnur, the creation of contemporary dance can begin with the use of contemporary clothing. Dance moves can be inspired from the costumes and may eventually produce something new. In addition to the inspiration from fashion, other contemporary sources of life can be useful ideas for the creation of dance. Osman Abdul Hamid in his early works and *Tari Anak Tani* performed during the Malay Dance Night at Victoria Theatre in December 1987, was able to create an atmosphere of working in a rice field even though there are no rice fields in Singapore. A writer from *The Straits Times* said that he could feel the agronomic atmosphere as the creative movements were so believable, and this feeling cascaded to the audience (*The Straits Times*,

December 17, 1987). Hanim Saleh also feels that the dance performance was good, and the artistic values portrayed can be easily understood by the audience (Interview with Hanim Mohd Saleh).

In this regard, contemporary can mean life experiences kept in the memory of audiences, be it about Singapore's landscape from past decades when there are farms, orchards or from television documentaries about rice fields and farms found outside Singapore. These visuals remain a part of the life of Singapore's audiences. In addition to urban agriculture, contemporary aspects of agriculture can derive from agricultural problems in modern times such as land clearance, soil shortages, pesticide pollution, organic farming, loss of youth, interest to become farmers, and others.

In 1979 in an article titled "Penari Harus Tahu Tema Tarian yang Ditarikan" ("Dancers Need to Know the Dance Themes They are Dancing") published in *Berita Harian* on January 25, expresses hope for dance experts to create a dance that illustrates the atmosphere of Singapore's current modern urban society. The article also mentions taking ideas from other types of dance performances in the world and customizing it to suit Singapore's artistic tastes (*Berita Harian*, January 25, 1979). It is hoped that the knowledge of the dance precedes its practice so that what is presented can be easily understood and felt by the audience.

During the Malay Dance Night at Victoria Theatre on December 13, 1987. Mohd Kamel Ridzuan presented *Tari Liku*, which tells the story of social upheavals among adolescents who are easily affected by world events. *Tari Rentak Tari* created by Mohd Khairi Supani was performed by the Sri Murni group to illustrate how modern teenage girls are difficult to attract. Salleh Buang choreographed the *Taridra* (dance-drama) *Dalang*, which depicts the character of a mastermind that causes various problems in the life of others. As the dancers read a spell, a spectral atmosphere seems to build-up coupled with engaging improvised movements, the seriousness of the moment was well portrayed. Mohd Naim Pani also created a dance title, *Nur*, that raises the idea of a person that is never satisfied with what he has earned. Queen Street Youth performed *Remaja-Remaja* (Teenagers), a Maswari Sori creation. All these dances can be included in the new creations work or contemporary category because they brought new ideas but still stand on traditions applying the old rules that have become the standard of Malay dance.

The theme of agriculture can still be raised but with an emphasis on urban agriculture rather than farming. Unique traditional Malay clothes can still be used for dance performances, but with a modern adaptation. In this regard, it is good to have a costume designer as a production member of a Malay dance performance. Costume designers can modify and supplement the Malay clothing to further showcase contemporary aspects of Malay dance (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018).

To date, most dancers in Singapore are part-timers. As in Indonesia and Malaysia, the dance profession has yet to enjoy a good salary and a promising career path. Most dancers have a primary job in order to pay the bills and among them will also have other activities such that practice and skills upgrading time is always compromised. Part-time dancers do not have enough time to work on their body and hence, the lack of technical skills and the control of body movements. One way to address this issue is to be inspired by full-time dancers from Indonesia or Malaysia and use this as motivation to encourage dancers in Singapore to become full-time professionals.

### **Aspects of Malay Dance**

From the above views, a good quality Singapore Malay dance needs to satisfy two aspects: the philosophical meaning as well as communicating the meaning to the audience. For the first condition, some standards have existed. These standards or 'taboos' are everything not to do when creating a new Malay dance. According to Ibrahim Yusof, an instructor from Singapore's youth group, Bermajapura from the Siglap Community Centre, taboos include, the sole of the dancer's foot must never face the audience and for female dancers never show the back of the dancer's arm/bicep or raise it too high (*Berita Harian*, December 31, 1980). Another indisputable rule in Malay dance is to dance with bare feet. With regards to costume, there seems to be no specific requirement. Although based on the standard, men wear *songkok* (head gear), long pants, and side cloth, while women wear *baju kurung*, these costumes vary depending on the type of dance performed (*Berita Harian*, December 31, 1980)

Idayu binti Sohmad gives an overview of critical rules in combining Malay dance with non-Malay dance. According to Sohmad, the non-Malay element is maximum of 25% while the Malay element is at least 75% in dance. More than this proportion, the Malay elements will be lost as foreign dance elements will become more prominent (*Berita Harian*, June 23, 1968). The second requirement is about communicating meaning of movements to the audience. This usually happens naturally when the soul of the dance is embodied in the dancing itself and this is also where the authenticity of the dance is experienced.

There has been effort to integrate ethnic group performances in order to show solidarity and nationhood, but many of these attempts have failed because the audience rejects the contrived nature of the presentation. When dance movements aren't given enough thought, the dance piece becomes disjointed and the audience is taken aback by the pretentiousness of the performance. When people mix or combine works that do not take into account distinctive features of the Malay dance, it creates confusion for the audience. The distinctiveness of an ethnic dance that is already known to the public creates a joy and excitement on its own without having to put in additional elements.

However, over the decades the Singapore ethnic dance scene has found the right formula for successful ethnic dance integration. There is a common theme and the presentation from each ethnic group is part of that theme, using one piece of music. The actual integration is done as a finale to showcase the Singapore identity and affirms the idea of nationhood. An example of this is the multi-ethnic dance piece with the theme *Bersatu Menuju Kesejahteraan* (Together Towards Harmony) performed during *Gentarasa (2018)*. Regarding the activities and performances at *Gentarasa 2018*, Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister of the Environment and Water Resources, Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, advisor to the People's Association Malay Activity Executive Committees Council (MESRA) says, "I see our young people not only delivering messages that are so sharp and so inspiring, but also in so beautiful a way, that represents the Malay arts so delicately, and so beautifully. And I am grateful because this time they also incorporated aspects of Chinese and Indian culture, in an embodied and well-meaning way" (*Berita Media Corp*, 8 July 2018).

However, choreographers should be mindful when creating multi-ethnic dance performances because some movements, especially the symbolic ones, have the potential to mislead viewers (*Berita Harian*, January 4, 1988). This cultural confusion affects not only the tourists who come to experience the authentic local culture but also young practitioners who are just beginning to understand their own culture. Adapting and combining other ethnic dance movements in Malay dance becomes a double-edged sword for the development of dance as a whole. On the one hand, incorporating movements from other dances enriches Malay dance, but on the other hand, this adaptation poses a risk for Malay dance to lose its distinctive identity. Even so, traditional Malay dance can be said to be the result of creative and cultural adaptation as it has different origins such as *Zapin* dance originating from the Middle-East.

## **Factors that Influence the Reduction of Quality in Singapore's Malay Dance**

### ***Lack of Interest***

The lack of interest in young people in learning Malay dance was reviewed as early as the late 1980's. Persatuan Kemuning engaged in a recruitment drive in 1988 in which only 20 adolescents signed up to join the Persatuan Kemuning dance workshop. Out of the 20, there were only 2 male participants involved (*Berita Harian*, January 6, 1988). Likewise, there was difficulty in recruiting male dancers. In Sriwana there are only 8 male dancers compared to 30 female dancers. The other six male dancers are senior dancers who have been in Sriwana for more than six years (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988). According to the secretary of Sriwana, Mr. Nongchik Ghani, the interest of male dancers learning Malay Dance was declining year after year. A similar situation occurred at the Rina Dancers Group. Within three years, the number of male dancers in the studio dropped from 30 dancers to half. Of the 15

male dancers in Rina Dancers Group, only four dancers remained in the studio for over three years. (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988).

In *Pesta Tari Menari Tradisional* (Traditional Dance Festival) at Geylang Serai Community Centre, there were only seven young couples participating in the Malay dance dancing contest in pairs (*Berita Harian*, 9 April 1987). These events should be seen as a setback as seven participants are not a lot to contest for the first three places in the competition. However, the editorial given by *Berita Harian* was positive: "Young people are still appreciating the Malay dance". This shows that the media were supportive of promoting traditional arts and culture in Singapore.

Facing this situation, Naim Pani decided to create Malay dance that made the number of male and female dancers unequal. This became different from the Malay dance tradition in which both male and female dancers, dance in pairs with each other. In addition, the tradition of Malay dance generally presents men and women performing similar dance moves. But Naim improvised by making male and female dancers carry out different dance moves. This is to prevent the impression that men have to dance in a graceful manner and lose their masculinity. Pani sought to keep the passion alive amongst male dancers by teaching them *Silat* movements first before they learned the finer aspects of the dance (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988).

The situation of the lack of male interest in Malay dance has taken place for a long time. Even from the 1950's, dance club managers were struggling to attract male dancers. In that era, men were more likely to go to Western nightlife places which were seen as immoral places. The dance activities they performed were Western dances that can be seen showing masculine traits such as samba and rumba which were popular in places such as Happy World and New World (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988). Interestingly, these places have actually influenced some men to learn Western dance instead of Malay dance. For example, Azmi Juhari claimed to be interested in dance because it was fun to party with Western dances like break dance, mambo, disco, and tango (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018).

The lack of men who are interested in Malay dance could be rooted in cultural issues. Malay dance had long been seen as a dance for entertainment and dancers were women entertainers who were entertaining men. This was true in the royal environment, where female dancers entertained royals and royal officials in the village setting, during royal or special parties (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988). As a result, the movement of Malay dance was dominated by graceful movements. These graceful Malay classical dance movements were certainly regarded as feminine such that it could not be appreciated by the male dancers. Men were only involved in crowded folk dances such as *joget lambak* that could be found during parties. Although the emergence of male dancers in Malay dance was particularly popular during the glory days of



Malay movies in the 1950's, male dancers' approval and popularity with the audience remained low (*The Straits Times*, February 8, 1988).

Remarking on this lack of interest among men, Salleh Buang blamed the choreographer who did not take into account the gender differences in the dance they were offering. Salleh Buang and Naim Pani were also investigating this issue by arranging a more masculine Malay dance with bold and agile characters and incorporating *Silat* in the dance (*The Strait Times*, February 8, 1988). However, according to Mr. Osman the early 1980's there had actually been a shift amongst the male dancers. More masculine movements were encouraged amongst themselves and by the choreographers in their performances to show contrast between the male and females (Interview with Mr. Osman Hamid, 2018).

Besides cultural issues, socio-economic problems also play a role in the lack of interest in Malay dance. Naim Pani explained that the men's reasons for withdrawing from dance activities were the excuses for work and family (*The Straits Times*, 8 February 1988). They have no time to dance because of the time spent with work and family. Only if dancing becomes their duty and their family is also a family of dancers, men may be active as dancers or choreographers. According to Azmi Juhari even though his wife was a dancer, he was forced to reduce the time he spent dancing when his second child was born and when his third child was born, he was no longer interested in Malay dance until his children had fully grown (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018).

There are a number of traditional art groups whose quality of performances seem under par when it comes to preserving the traditional art form. For example, Dondang Sayang (a lyrical poetic art form associated with the Malays and Peranakans which was paired with a mixture of *Asli*, *Inang* and *Joget* dances), although it is unique in its beautiful rhyme arrangement, it seems not to interest the younger generation (Interview with Fauziah Hanom, 2018).

Similarly, the lack of interest was also highlighted in an interview, Hamidah Mohd Sahriff, who at the time was 19 years old, was asked about her reasons for being a member of the PA and Sriwana dance groups. She answered that most Malay children were lacking interest in Malay dance and that made her worried that Malay dance would disappear in Singapore (*Berita Harian*, September 20, 1989). Singapore Malay dance has responded to the challenges of the lack of male dancers in their dance performances. For example, contemporary Malay dances are now active, energetic and are becoming increasingly gender neutral. This makes Malay dance widely accepted amongst adolescent males and leads to the possibilities of performances involving paired dances.

However, this also has its own problems. The power and dynamism in the choreography leads to changes in the view that Malay dance is a form of sport and not art. If viewed as a sport, the

focus would be on physical aspects, especially body movements. The focus on manifesting the expressions in the eyes, face, smile or the breathing patterns are greatly reduced, this in turn loses some of the aesthetic effects of the art form. If seen as a sport it also loses the ability or drive for creating something new. If you keep dance as an art, the artistic expression of the soul would be the primary objective. This point about the soul is very important because it makes the subtle and meaningful aspects of the dance comprehensively conveyed to the audience. At the same time, the up-tempo and dynamic movements attract the younger generation to be interested in Malay dance.

### ***Lack of Knowledge and Experience***

In Singapore, Malay dance was usually part of social events and entertainment which was passion driven rather than skills based. It remained on the side-lines until the Government's drive to promote cultural activities in order to foster nationhood and build a Singaporean identity in the late 1950's. There was greater exposure to other ethnic dance performances through interaction with other dance groups in the ASEAN region through travel overseas and performances in Singapore. Throughout the next decades, dancers were evolving and learning from this exposure. For example Som Said attended training with Pak Nordin and Pak Bagong in Jogjakarta in 1983 and was also sent to perform in Russia and Europe.

By the time the 1980's and 1990's came around there was more interest in Malay dance, however, people especially in the entertainment industry did not see traditional Malay dance as being mainstream and important for cultural preservation but rather as a filler for their shows. This lack of deeper knowledge and experience gave a negative impression of the quality of Malay dance. The audience was very disappointed with the performance presented on the programme Melodi'84, which was broadcast on television on July 30, 1984. The programme was a playful comedy show in which the closing performance was a Malay dance. The show was produced by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation's (SBC) Malay Station. The program that was offered was considered too contrived, so much so, that it disappointed and bored the audience. The Malay dance presented at the end of the program did not appear to be choreographed properly, especially for the male dancers. It was clear that the male dancers could not perform the Malay dance well (Letter from Reader, Readers' Forum, *Berita Harian*, 7 August 1984).

In addition, a dance audition was held to select dancers for the Malay Dance Night in June 1988. There were 40 young people who were interested in participating Malay dance for the Malay Dance Night. However, after being selected, only 20 people really knew the basic movements of Malay dance. Furthermore, only one person had extensive experience in dance (Salleh Buang, *Berita Harian*, 25 December, 1987). This shows that there is still a lot of space

open for activists of Malay culture to promote the interest of young people to dance Malay dance by providing knowledge and skills that are important.

Successful integration of multi-ethnic dances requires choreographers' deep knowledge of their own dance as well as the dance they wish to integrate. Nongchik Ghani and Jaafar Haji Yakub argued that merging of dance must be carried out by skilled and knowledgeable people who had studied dance for a long time (*Berita Harian*, 3 July 1978). Therefore having a strong understanding of the movements performed in various cultures' dances is an integral aspect of multi-ethnic dance integration in order to avoid a knee-jerk reaction from viewers as seen above in Melodi'84. *Berita Harian* also referred to the method used by established dancers, Som Said and Naim Pani in combining Malay dance and non-Malay dance. In general, they would start by thinking about the theme, then with the background and rhythm in accordance with the dance that was intended to be created (*Berita Harian*, 3 July 1978).

Observations have shown that interesting movements and motions alone may not necessarily portray the real intent or message of the dance performance. The ability to manifest feelings and emotions in dance movements is second nature to trained and skilled dancers. Therefore unless a dancer has clocked enough "practice time" and truly embraces the training given by an experienced choreographer, a dancer's ability to convey meaning in the dance may be hampered. According to Tom Ibnur, this inability is due to the lack of mastery in expressing feelings and emotions. A technique which requires a lot of exploration of the inner self which sadly is not sufficiently developed (Interview with Tom Ibnur, 2018). Usually, in a good performance, the fluidity in the dancers' movements simultaneously produces a dynamic feel which can be easily sensed by the audience.

A lack of life experience may also make dancers oversimplify the meaning they want to convey in the dance presentation. Dance is very closely related to the art of acting. Some of these feelings could be triggered by subtle movements taught by the dance teacher so that even if a dancer does not have life experience relevant to the dance performed, the dancer could still perform a Malay dance of quality. Another point to note is the understanding of music. Most choreographers do not learn about music and how best to utilize music in dance. Today, where live music is commonly used to accompany dance performances, some knowledge of music becomes essential. Music reinforces feelings as well as provides the ambience for the dance. According to Azmi Juhari, to ensure the right mood is conveyed to the audience it would be best for choreographers to work hand-in-hand with music composers in creating music specifically for their dance presentations (Interview with Azmi Juhari, 2018). Therefore, an internal emotion like sadness, numbness, and even depression can be intensified through music. Similarly, fast paced dance movements should have fast upbeat tempo as an accompaniment.



### ***Urban Life and Internet Platforms***

In comparison to the past, as described above, modern life in Singapore has implications for the development of Singapore Malay dance. The fast-pace life in urban environments puts psychological pressure on young choreographers to move quickly in their creative pursuits. As a result, a dichotomy in dance creations occurs. High dynamic practical movements are usually favoured against the precision of subtle movements with technical accuracy in traditional dance.

Today, anybody can dance. The convenience provided by information technology allows everyone to learn Malay dance from existing sources such as YouTube videos and online blogs. There is no necessity to attend formal classes or come to an association to learn dance as in the past (Interview with Fauziah Hanom, 2018). In this regards, easy access to current dance trends through technological advancements has also contributed to problems mentioned above, namely, the lack of knowledge and experience which leads to the lack of quality in Malay dance.

### ***Criticism towards Malay Contemporary Dance in Singapore***

The early definition of New Creation Dances which cite 1934 as the start of New Creation works does not necessarily apply to Singapore. A more accurate start point would be to use 1965, Singapore's Independence Year as the start of New Creation Dances in Singapore. Even though Singapore's national day is in 1965, the country has self-ruled since 1959. In the 1950's the government of the day had been promoting multi ethnic dances including Malay dance through government events. In order to keep up with the increasing demand for performances, the audience will usually see the same repertoire repeated in different events. This repertoire included *Tari Lilin*, *Tari Tudung Saji*, *Tari Payung*, and several Joget dance variations. Even though there was a limited repertoire of traditional Malay dances there was a realization of the need to create newer and more relevant dance pieces that the audience could engage with. It was not until after 1965 that the researchers saw Singapore's Malay dance taking shape with new creations choreographed by senior dancers such as the likes of Som Said and Naim Pani. In fact, criticism of the changing standards of Malay dance had emerged at least in the decade of the 1970s where people were talking about New Creation Works as contemporary works.

There was strong motivation to show the multi-ethnic dances and newer movements for example using more dynamic moves and more an upbeat tempo. Being a living culture, the Malay dance community should expect changes in what they practice and how to stay relevant in order to reach-out and garner interest of the younger generation. There has been a lot of criticism given by Malay dance activists who were involved in the development of Malay dances during post-independence. Echoing these thoughts, Hamim Hassan views the Malay

contemporary dance as having low artistic quality. This is caused in part by the selection of rhythms that are fast and practically incompatible with subtler traditional features. Furthermore, there seems to be a re-write of ethical guidelines in Malay dance. Hassan even used the word "abusive" to show that contemporary Malay dance characteristics did not adhere to the strict rules of traditional Malay dance (Interview with Hamim Hassan, 2019).

In addition, the character of Malay contemporary dance involving many additional non-Malay elements both in terms of dancers and choreography raises many questions about the aesthetic value of Singapore Malay contemporary dance. Hamim Hassan has no problem with the mixed aspects of contemporary dance but insists that this is not as beautiful as traditional Malay dance.

Furthermore, there was already some resistance by the general public to these new creation works even in the early 1970's. A reader expressed his frustration at loss of the concept of authenticity in Malay dance, after visiting several nightclubs in Singapore. For example, dancers wore traditional Malay costumes but dance to Malay dance with the accompaniment of Western songs or Latin American songs. The President of *Majlis Pusat* (Central Council for Malay Organization) replied by asking cultural leaders to examine the suitability of the dance to the development of Malay culture (*Berita Harian*, November 14, 1972). Meanwhile, secretary general of *Perwanit* (*Persatuan Wanita dan Teruna*), Johari Uriff, distinguished this suitability from its function. If it is intended for commercialization purposes, such customization is permitted because it adapts to the preferences of the customers. Meanwhile, if it is intended for the development of art, the authenticity of Malay dance must still be maintained (*Berita Harian*, November 14, 1972).

Som Said suggested that New Creation Works does not erode the authenticity of dance movements and the elegance of Malay dance. New Creation Works is a theatrical work that is arranged in earnest, and not just of mixing up various dances to create contemporary Malay dance (*Berita Harian*, 15 September 1989). The New Creation Works which were the target of criticism did not adhere to traditional philosophical foundation of Malay Dance and were not well understood by foreign audiences.

The first wave of criticism of New Creation and Malay Contemporary Dance has been mentioned above however we are now experiencing a second wave of criticism from the young up and coming choreographers. While the senior choreographers feel that Malay contemporary Dance should be grounded in traditional values the younger ones feel that it should be contemporary. Contemporary here means, freedom to express the way they feel today. If that freedom is bound then it is no longer considered contemporary.

Should there be a continuum, where traditional works can evolve to new creative works, engaging and captivating the audience through a story? Contemporary works could develop



deeper thought processes manifesting concepts or ideas skilfully crafted through movement and in dance before being presented to the audience.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown the complications and conflicts which arise when Malay Dance evolves and changes. This can be seen clearly in the different perspective practitioners have about new creative works and Malay contemporary dance. Various problems were presented such as lack of interest, lack of knowledge and experience, the use of the internet, audience dissatisfaction and the weight of developing a progressive dance while adhering to traditional Malay dance rules and avoiding taboos. Steps were taken to solve problems and with the ongoing standardization of the basic dances, there is hope for a general competency assessment to be carried out thereby raising practitioners' standard and quality. Over the years, dancers learn how to better use their bodies as communicative tools. They learn about somatic psychology and body psychology and realise that dance and other creative movements can help in developing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive competencies (Rubin et al., 1998). These are areas that need further exploring and in the long run could be possibly assist in raising the bar and bringing Malay dance to a new paradigm.

On a broader note the study shows that there is a lack of research on Malay traditional arts in Singapore which opens opportunities for more academic work to be done in this area. Research was primarily conducted through direct interviews with dancers and dance instructors themselves as well as through media coverage of events and newspaper interviews. It is hoped this research piece will set the precedent for further academic work in the areas of Malay traditional arts with a focus on dance.



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