

Chapter 4

Forging Traditional Dance in Malaysia

Joseph Gonzales,
Imran Syafiq Mohd. Affandi

Introduction

The traditional dances that are practiced in Malaysia reflect the diverse ethnic constitution of the nation of 35 million people. This breadth of dance genres includes dances of the indigenous peoples, and the migrant communities that have settled in Malaysia for more than six centuries. However, with the passage of time and urbanization, these traditional dances are increasingly less practiced and becoming seemingly irrelevant in the lives of the younger Malaysians, who are more fascinated by K-Pop and other popular genres. ASK Dance Company¹ is a private dance company based in Kuala Lumpur that has championed the preservation, revitalization, and propagation of traditional dances through its outreach projects since 2011, with the financial support of the Sime Darby Foundation,² the charity arm of a large conglomerate in Malaysia. Through a series of programs such as *Connecting Communities*, *Get Malaysia Dancing*, *Building Bridges* and currently, *Forging Traditions*, more than 20,000 people have been taught a few of these dances. The funding has also enabled the company of young dance artists to sustain themselves in a challenging professional landscape. With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, *Forging Traditions Beyond Borders* was launched in 2020 to deliver two dances each year through online platforms. This is a milestone for dance in Malaysia.

¹ www.askdancecompany.com

² www.yayasansimedarby.com

Research Questions and Methodology

To address the shortfalls and gaps within the Malaysian dance ecosystem, this paper is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are sustainable models for professional dance companies in Malaysia?
2. What are effective strategies to propagate traditional dance in a nation where it is not highly valued?
3. How has the challenge of the pandemic been confronted and addressed?

Each of the above questions requires a depth of contextual discourse that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, this paper will attempt to provide a comprehensive overview.

The information disseminated in this paper was acquired through several research methodologies. Since the writers manage the program and company, an autoethnographic approach was adopted to provide a first-person account and insight into the dance industry, with focus on the company, its functions, and challenges. The impact studies of the outreach programs draw on quantitative and qualitative research methodologies for data collection that used surveys and questionnaires with structured and semi-structured questions, distributed over the course of the implementation of the program. All research ethics and protocols have been adhered to.

Background and Establishment of the Company

With the establishment of the National Academy of Arts (known now by its acronym ASWARA) in Malaysia in 1994, lecturers and students led by the pioneers Aida Redza, Suhaimi Magi, Lena Ang, Joseph Gonzales, Judimar Hernandez, Dayang Mariana, among others began to perform as a fluid collective at various festivals and productions for several years (Gonzales 2008). These seeds of an idea came to fruition a decade and a half later: the ASK Dance Company was officially founded and registered in 2011 by Joseph Gonzales during his time as Dean of the Faculty of Dance (1998-2015). The company was housed within ASWARA upon an agreement with the then Director Najib Dawa to provide alternate employment opportunities for graduates and as a tool for the further promotion of the arts.

ASWARA was forward thinking, realizing that this collaborative model would enable greater visibility for dance and was an ideal strategy to publicize the institution

through workshops and performances by its outstanding graduates. Meanwhile the company benefited from the resources made available to rehearse, perform, access to costumes and local transportation. The pioneer dancers of the company were 2010 graduates of the first cohort of the Bachelor of Dance program of ASWARA. In 2016, Imran Syafiq Mohd Affandi assumed the role as Managing Director. He oversees all aspects of management, networking, contractual negotiations, schedules, working closely with his team of dancers.³ As the company grew in stature, so did the need for space for full-time students of ASWARA, and thus in July 2017, the company achieved another milestone and moved to its own small, rented premises in Ampang Hilir, Kuala Lumpur. Here the Malaysian Dance Centre was launched. This was officiated by the former First Lady of Malaysia, 93-year-old Dr. Siti Hasmah who climbed up a flight of stairs above a KK Mart, a twenty-four-hour convenience store, to see what young people of Malaysia were up to. It was surreal.

The Vision of the Company

In Malaysia, the majority of full-time dance companies are government owned. Approximately 30 in number, these include state-funded dance troupes which are a separate entity from the federal-funded groups in each state, as well as the tourism groups, and the Istana Budaya (National Theatre) dance group (Gonzales 2014). There are only two private professional dance companies that employ performers on a full-time contractual basis—Dua Space Dance Theatre⁴ and ASK Dance Company. Most professional dancers are independent artists who work on a project-to-project basis and sustain themselves through a portfolio of performances, workshops and or teaching projects. Many own registered companies through which they access grants and run their businesses.

The ASK Dance Company was established to provide the rare opportunity for professional dancers in Malaysia to continue to develop post-tertiary training through company classes, rehearsals, and public performances on a consistent basis. This would enable them to further build upon the years of intensive training and continue to scale greater heights. The artistic vision of the company is to champion a Malaysian identity or multiplicity of identities, on local and international platforms. The company repertoire spans diverse genres of dance, from classical dances, traditional dance forms of the ethnic communities of the nation, to contemporary dances. The dancers, who are trained in multiple dance languages, give choreographers the freedom to explore and make work that embodies the “Malaysian” or other styles. The company aspires to emulate Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, the City Contemporary

³ 2021 company members are Kimberly Yap, Zulkarnain Zuber, Fatin Nadhirah Rahmat, Azammudin Tumiran, Shafiq Yussof, Wong Shan Tie, Gan Ning Xuan, and Adlan Sairin.

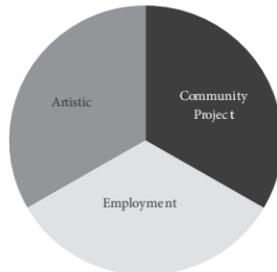
⁴ www.duaspacecancetheatre.com.my

Dance Company, or the Alvin Ailey American Dance Centre that are hotbeds of creativity within their own cities and countries. These companies have thriving dance centres and annual performance seasons which include national and international tours. As an important goal of ASK Dance Company is to promote Malaysian traditional dance heritage, the first outreach program *Connecting Communities* was launched in 2011.

Highlights and Achievements

ASK Dance Company has played a major role in promoting Malaysian dance locally through participation in major festivals such as the Yayasan Sime Darby Festival, Iskandar Arts Festival, JB Arts Festival, George Town Festival, MyDance Festival, and the Kakiseni Festival. The company has invested hugely to make its brand international, bringing it to the Asia Pacific Dance Festival 2019 in Hawai'i, USA, One Belt One Road 2018 in Henan, China, and Yokohama Dance Collection 2017 in Japan, to name a few.

- Develop over 20 artistic productions (full length and mix-billed dance performance)
- Creating over 30 new pieces which were showcased at international and local performance.
- Collaborating with 21 choreographers from all over the world.
- Trained 39 full-time dancers and 1 finance officer.
- Provide internships training-more than 10 interns has been trained from various universities.



- More than 150 workshops has been conducted nationwide since 2011.
- Reached out to approximately 300 schools and universities.
- More than 10 traditional dances has been taught to the community.



Figure 1. Overview of the Company

ASK Dance Company has received innumerable awards for its artistic productions at the Kakiseni Boh Cameronian Arts Awards, the only independent arts awards in the country, demonstrating a consistency in the quality of production. The company philosophy is deeply committed to the education not merely of its audiences and workshop participants but that of the artists themselves, to inspire them to keep growing and chart their own course, within and beyond the company. To this end, participation in projects that have long-term benefits is carefully curated. Members of the company have received multiple scholarships to participate in exchange programmes and residencies. A few outstanding projects are the Un Yamada

productions in Japan and Malaysia, Ballet with KL Danceworks, Goethe Institute's German artist Riki von Falken projects, international teaching workshops in Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These invaluable opportunities have spurred the artists to pursue their postgraduate studies in Malaysia or abroad, and their wealth of experience, and thus enabling them to excel in their new institutions.

The Forging Traditions Project and Its Evolution

The decreasing practice of traditional Malaysian dances is a result of decades of modernization accompanied by mass migration to urban centres. Large percentages of the population moved to the cities in search of work, with the intention to elevate the financial status of families whose sources of income moved from agriculture to manufacturing and industry. In the process, folk art that was very much a fabric of village communities has become more obscure (Md Nor 1993; Nasuruiddin 1995). Additionally, resurgent Islamization has challenged the practice of the arts in some Malaysian states which adhere to more fundamental philosophies of religion and are experiencing disintegrating inter-ethnic relations (Husin Ali 2008; Prystay 2006).

From 2011-2013, *Connecting Communities* aimed to provide exposure and an introductory experience of dance. The project included weekend dance workshops of multiple genres geared for primary and secondary school students. Each genre-specific workshop was two hours long, and at night, the participants would witness a performance by the company that included a few dances that they had learned along with other dances from the company's repertoire. This enabled the participants to appreciate the art and the artists more profoundly. Eventually, the company found that having day-long workshops followed by performances was neither feasible nor sustainable due to factors such as limited time for on-site rehearsals, exhaustion, ill-equipped venues, and a scarcity of technicians for performances. Thus, the subsequent programs *Get Malaysian Dancing* and *Building Bridges* did not have the component of performances beyond informal showings of the dances whenever possible.

Nevertheless, the overarching principles of the projects in the early years was to provide the first contact with traditional dance (and even dance itself) to as many people as possible. The programs were conducted around twenty locations nationwide over a two-year period. The participants were taught eight different dances such as *Joget Gamelan*, *Joget*, *Zapin*, *Chinese Fan Dance*, *Hip hop*, *Contemporary dance*, *Bollywood*, and *Ngajat Iban*. These programs received an overwhelming response with an average of 300 participants in every location.

Community Outreach Project

6 to 12 locations evert year
Total Participants 19,600 pax

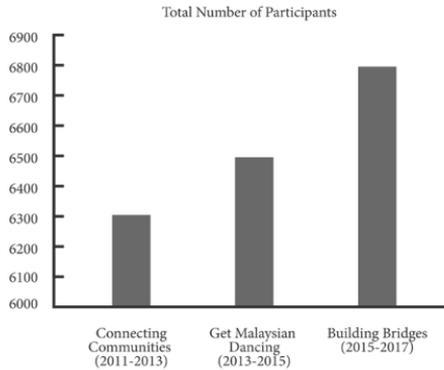


Figure 2. Number of Participants per Project (2011-2017)

Forging Traditions of Malay Dance

In 2016, after rigorous SWOT⁵ analysis, the company designed a new program that would delve more deeply into selected dances as opposed to merely introducing a wide range of dances. The shift towards greater profundity was geared towards maximizing long-term benefits by incorporating good performance skills and pedagogical training for traditional dance. The company realized that the greatest impact would be to instill a love for dance in teachers who would then communicate this passion to their students. This program would equip them with knowledge to conduct basic traditional Malay dance classes in order to contribute to the propagation of the dance forms amongst the youth and the community at large. The decision to focus on Malay dance was due to the tremendous lack of documentation, exposure and existing preconceptions regarding the form that persist despite the Malay ethnic majority.

Thus, *Forging Traditions: Training the Trainers* was launched. Trainee teachers in National Institution for Teacher Training (Institut Pendidikan Guru IPG), Primary and Secondary School teachers already teaching or in charge of the school dance clubs, teachers and students from Sekolah Seni Malaysia (SSM), Malaysia's high school for the arts, were the priority participants. Additionally, teachers would often request that the students from their school dance clubs be allowed to participate, as did individuals with prior experience.

⁵ SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) created by Albert Humphrey at the Stanford Research Institute in the 1960s, that is used to identify internal and external factors that affect the growth of the company.



Figure 3. Publicity Poster for Forging Traditions: Training the Trainers

Implementation of the Program

Generally, in Malaysia, schools with the financial resources outsource dance teaching to professional trainers who conduct weekly or bi-weekly classes for clubs and societies. The schools without these resources, typically task their in-house schoolteachers with this responsibility. Students are prepared for performances and competitions in a variety of genres depending on the occasions or events. Observing these shortcomings, ASK Dance Company proposed the outreach program to the Ministry of Education that eventually endorsed it, and agreed to a joint certification. This was a milestone for dance.

Forging Traditions: Training the Trainers was a three-day dance workshop in which two traditional Malay dances were taught. This program was a five-year project conducted in six different locations each year but centered at the SSM and IPG campuses. Over the first two phases, the classical Malay dances *Joget Gamelan Timang Burung*, *Terinai Mengadap*, *Joget Gamelan Topeng*, and Malay folk dances *Zapin Tenglu* and *Zapin Melayu Johor* were taught while Phase 3 focused on the teaching

of the *Mengadap Rebab* and *Inang* dances (Nasuruddin 1994). The participants learned the history and context of the dance, techniques, sequences, musicality, and an introduction to methods of choreography and rearrangement of floor patterns, using different songs and dynamics.

With the inclusion of training pedagogical skills, the company developed a module “Teaching Traditional Malay Dance” accompanied by a detailed manual. This was made available for the participants to purchase. While the company dancers had all studied these dances, the materials delivered had to fulfill the needs of a teacher-to-be. Needless to say, it had to be accurate and comprehensive, and thus further research was essential. This research included conducting interviews with the relevant dance specialists to ensure quality control. For Phase 3, the consultants were Fatimah Abdullah and Zamzuriah Zahari for *Mengadap Rebab* and Mohd Seth Hamzah for the *Inang* dance, who are all lecturers at ASWARA with extensive experience. Subsequently appropriate introductory technique exercises for each of the dances were designed, sequences were analyzed and deconstructed to ensure clarity and easy accessibility especially for the novice. During this process, additional traditional dance movement terminologies were developed for a better grasp of the dance. Frame-to-frame pictures and DVD videos that contained all the learning material were also produced. The process was labour intensive and required meticulousness.

In order to ensure the best uptake for the programs, which is vital for the success and impact, the company has vigorously courted the mainstream and online media, conducting endless interviews, and sending press releases, organizing talks, photoshoots, and other promotional and publicity events. Concurrently, the Ministry of Education and IPG have assisted in reaching out to all schools in Malaysia to enlist greater participation.

Time/Days	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
9:00am-9:30am	Registration	Registration	Registration
9:30am-10:00am	Warm Up	Warm Up	Warm Up
10:00am-11:30am	MENGADAP REBAB: Demonstration and Technique	MENGADAP REBAB: Advanced Steps	Revision and Choreography - arrangement of floor patterns
11:30am-1:00pm	INANG: Demonstration and Technique	INANG: Advanced Steps	Revision and Choreography
1:00pm-2:00pm	Break	Break	Break
2:00pm-3:30pm	MENGADAP REBAB: Basic Steps	MENGADAP REBAB: Revision	Closing and Certification Ceremony - Final Showcase
3:30pm-5:00pm	INANG: Basic Steps	INANG: Revision	
5:00pm-5:30pm	Briefing	Assessment	

Figure 4. Program Schedule for Forging Traditions

The program hopes to reach at least 900 trainers each year. The participants are required to attend all the classes to obtain their certificate of participation as the learning module is progressive beginning from the fundamentals to the more advanced steps. To complete the module, each trainer is required to teach a minimum of four students as a demonstration of their teaching prowess. A submission of a detailed report with photographic or video documentation is also a requisite. This could include rehearsals, performances for school events, sharing sessions during co-curricular activities, and discussions regarding various aspects of the dances. These reports are submitted via email, and after judicious assessment and satisfying the panels of accomplishments and competencies, successful participants are awarded their certificates of completion. With these reports, the company can measure the impact of the program and respond to matters arising. If this goes according to plan, there is the potential to reach approximately 3,600 people in one year. Ideally, this number will keep growing and create a ripple effect of dance over the years.

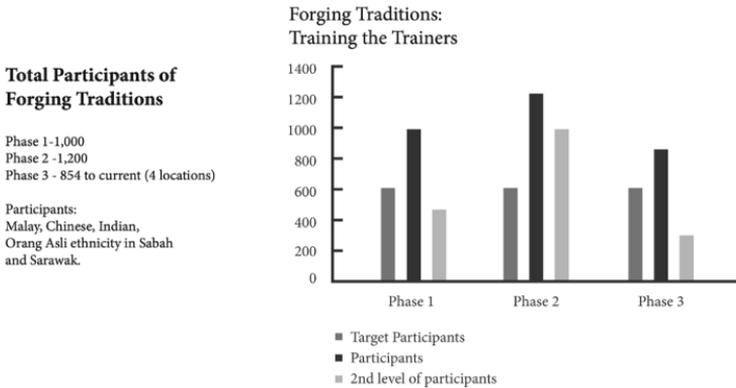


Figure 5. Number of Participants for Forging Traditions Phase 1-3

Forging Traditions: Beyond Borders

However, in 2020, life came to a grinding halt. No one imagined the tragic and long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 virus. The company responded promptly, undertaking discussions with the stakeholders on possible ways to proceed.

The Artistic Director drew from his experience at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts which had moved its courses to the online delivery mode in November 2019 because of the demonstrations and the subsequent disruptions. Higher learning institutions in Malaysia (and this small private company) do not possess the enhanced technology such as Panopto multi-camera recording and editing systems that the well-resourced Academy does. Therefore, simpler, more conventional, methods of recording and editing needed to be employed. The team proposed the online program *Forging Traditions: Beyond Borders* to the patrons, (notably the Yayasan Sime Darby Foundation) who were aware of the challenges that lay ahead with the onslaught of the pandemic. There were rigorous discussions on possible pitfalls and challenges to enhance the proposal. Over the past ten years, growing mutual trust and respect between the patrons and the recipients has evolved into an enriching and symbiotic relationship, as evidenced by the award of a grant of RM300,000 per year.

Developing the teaching module for *Forging Traditions: Beyond Borders* was a huge challenge. The discussions were robust, and the end users, specifically non-professionally trained dancers and teachers-to-be, were of utmost importance in the design process. Since the teachers of the program already possess kinesthetic intelligence honed over many years of rigorous practice, it was vital that they step into the feet, bodies and shoes of the participants. They had to imagine all situations they would encounter, what sequences participants might find difficult, as well as other potential problems. The program was planned to be delivered via synchronous and asynchronous online teaching and learning methodologies. Video materials that were earlier developed for the guidebook were further enhanced. After the company underwent intense training to develop essential communication skills, familiarization with Zoom and Google Classrooms and specific distinctive features several trial sessions were conducted. This intense process took 3 months, and the program was launched in August 2020. This is the first certified online training program for Malay dance in Malaysia.

Challenges

There were and are innumerable challenges in conducting and implementing this program, and the foremost is the apathy of Malaysians towards the arts in general. As with all developing nations, the thrust of the national agenda is toward material and infrastructure progress. This is understandable. As a general observation, it is accepted that once “progress” has been attained, there will be time and disposable income to explore other aspects and interests in life.

A constant challenge has been management and administration of the program with limited human resources. It is physically and mentally draining to work on both the administration and the implementation of the program simultaneously. Since the members all multi-task, it is a mammoth undertaking to organize and conduct the workshops from one location to another. As one program ends, the focus has to shift to the next venue. The preparation is divided into smaller management groups—scouting for suitable locations with appropriate facilities, getting approvals, sending out invitations, endless emails, faxes, and phone calls, overcoming communication problems, internet issues, unresponsive officials, and more along the way.

One of the considerations for the venues aside from facilities, is that it should ideally be accessible to nearby schools. As the program is not a residency, participants would need to commute back and forth over the three days which is especially difficult in

places that are more remote. There have been occasions where the company has had to conduct the program in community halls which were poorly maintained, without air-conditioning, and sometimes even without water! Since the program needs physical and emotional support from the school teachers, the company occasionally does feel that we are adding to their workload. The program was an added task that possibly deprived them of a weekend off--especially during the face-to-face workshops. Unless they are truly passionate about dance themselves, they may be reluctant to engage enthusiastically--if at all.

Although the support from YSD has enabled the company to continue to function, funding is still insufficient. In the ideal face-to-face *Forging Traditions* program, the company would like to be the perfect Malaysian host and not only offer their participants a conducive learning environment but also provide them with food and beverages, and offer accommodation to those who would be unable to attend because they live a distance away. At present, this is not possible, as the ringgit is already being stretched to the limit.

Responding to the Pandemic

The proactive response by the company to COVID-19 has been the development of the online learning module *Forging Traditions Beyond Borders*. This is a benchmark in Malaysia dance. However, most unfortunately, the pandemic has severely impacted artistic plans and finances as it has with all private arts organizations across the globe. The company has had to rethink and adapt to sustain creativity and maintain visibility beyond its outreach project. Thus, engagement in online events became a priority.

In November 2020, the company participated in the Indonesia Virtual Arts Festival hosted by the Institut Kesenian Yogyakarta and the Swan Festival of Lights and organized by Saraswati Mahavidhyalaya in Perth, Australia. The *Roots of Dance* project was an international collaboration with the Polish Institute of Dance and Music that introduced to Polish Folk Dance and various choreographic tools. A small grant was received from CENDANA⁶ to produce a dance film entitled *Hymns of the Abandoned*. This attracted a fair amount of interest and was reviewed in mainstream press and on a radio review program. It was choreographed by Zulkarnain Zuber and filmed by Aaron Chieng, a graduate of Sunway University in Malaysia. In the efforts to lift spirits, the *Blossom Series* of one-minute dances were published online for Chinese New Year, while the *Pelita Series* applied the same concept for dances

⁶ www.cendana.com.my

to celebrate Eid Mubarak. These short clips garnered approximately 10,000 viewers via Facebook and Instagram. Meanwhile, International Women's Day was celebrated with online workshops and a showcase of a previous production of feminist work *Women on Top* that did not have the same impact, reflecting attention spans of audiences for online activities.

The company has responded to the current issues of isolation, prohibition of live performances, and closure of theatres by taking its work online, albeit knowing that the audiences are also suffering from Zoom and online fatigue. Despite these challenges, the driving philosophy is to keep the arts in the public domain.

Future Aspirations

In the preservation and propagation of traditional dance, no one person or organization can take on the responsibility by themselves. The task is too mammoth, and the saying goes “it takes a village.” Therefore, while this paper has focused on the case study of ASK Dance Company in its role as a private organization in perpetuating dance traditions, it complements the efforts of the government bodies associated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as well as other private organizations such as Pusaka⁷ and the Nusantara Performing Arts Research Centre⁸, as well as universities and individuals.

Moving forward, the company intends to continue the program of *Forging Traditions*, possibly with both online and in-person teaching modes as soon as it is safe. Simultaneously, it is a continuing goal for the company to present both traditional and contemporary Malaysian dance to global audiences through participation in international dance festivals, projects, and exchange programs and forge an arts loving nation and enhance greater cooperation with other nations. Malaysian arts seem to fly under the radar when compared to its Indonesian, Thai, or Cambodian neighbours. As this vision requires a sizable investment of finance, the company continues to endeavor to secure more grants and the application process is incessant. It is hoped that through these efforts, Malaysia's dance traditions will be embraced, recognized, and appreciated by all, gaining a foothold in contemporary society.

⁷ www.pusaka.org

⁸ www.nusparc.com



Figure 6. WE Dance
WE Dance 2018: Participants Learning *Zapin Pekajang*
(Credit: West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong)



Figure 7. Asia Pacific International Dance Festival, Hawai'i, USA. 2019:
Participants Learning *Mengadap Rebab*



Figure 8. Process of Documentation and Creation of the Teaching Module



Figure 9. Delivery of the Online Program

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