No other art form is considered more authentic and representative of Malay performing arts than the ancient Kelantanese dance-theatre, Mak Yong, as it is mostly untouched by external sources.

The art form was declared by Unesco as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in 2005, but the sad thing is one would be hard-pressed to find it performed today.

That has largely to do with Mak Yong being banned in Kelantan since the 1990s, as it was deemed to be against Islamic teachings due to its animist and Hindu-Buddhist roots. Then, there is the fact that the younger generation does not have much interest in taking it up.

Zamzuriah Zahari is one exception. The Kelantanese, who holds a diploma in dance from Aswara and a bachelor’s degree in drama performance from Universiti Malaya (UM), is an expert in Mak Yong and Tari Inai Kelantan, as well as a master of the traditional Mek Mulong dance. A talented dancer, singer and actor, the all-round performer received a National Arts Award in 2006 for her work in dance.

As part of her final year project at UM four years ago, Zamzuriah wrote and performed a monologue play, Usikan Rebab, that explored Mak Yong and the conflict between culture and religion. It tells the story of a mother, a prima donna Mak Yong performer, who wants to pass on the art form to her three daughters, but they refuse to carry on her legacy. Moreover, the village community frowns upon Mak Yong performances as the people believe they are immoral and go against religious teachings.

Zamzuriah is restaging the monodrama, but this time with director Norzizi Zulkifli. A Mak Yong enthusiast and advocate of the ancient art form, Norzizi has performed in and also directed several Mak Yong productions, the last one being Mak Yong Titis Sakti in 2009 at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. The story was adapted from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and the production beautifully combined stylised dance and...
acting, vocal and instrumental music, and formal and improvised spoken text — all the elements that are important to a Mak Yong performance — to make for a stunning showcase.

Norzizi says she encountered Mak Yong as a student at Aswara and was instantly captivated by it. “My passion is towards the sound. When I first heard the music, I started to feel something inside of me,” she recalls. “I wanted to move with the music, although I did not grow up with Mak Yong. The first time I performed it, at the end when I put on the headgear, I just felt like the character was me. I told that to my teacher and she said I had the ‘angin.’” (Angin in this context is defined as a strong attraction for something, and an intense desire to perform a particular art form.)

In reading Zamzuriah’s monologue, Norzizi was struck by the mother–daughter conflicts. She felt for the character of the mother — all alone in the kampung, with her three daughters having abandoned her in different ways. One is an ustazah (religious teacher) who opposes the art form on religious grounds, another does not even stay in touch with the mother, while the third would rather pursue modern art forms than take up Mak Yong. The play cleverly addresses the different arguments leveled against Mak Yong and also the issues that threaten the survival of the ancient dance-theatre today.

Norzizi explains that she is also interested in bringing to light another aspect of the issue — the psychological and emotional stress that Mak Yong performers go through when they can no longer perform the main puteri, a ritualistic healing ceremony connected to Mak Yong.

Norzizi had interviewed Mak Yong performers who revealed to her that if they didn’t perform, they would be “sick inside... their emotional state was not stable. But sometimes people don’t realise they are sick in that sense. As a director, I wanted to highlight this”.

The play may tell the story of a Mak Yong performer, but it will not be staged in the Mak Yong style. Norzizi has instead injected elements of it into the production in the form of songs and dances, all of which were created with Zamzuriah, who will be tackling all four characters in the play. The accompanying traditional music will be performed by Kamarul Baisah Hussin, who will be playing the rebab, gong and gendang. Director and musician both explored the kind of sounds and effects they wanted for the play, and Norzizi even worked Kamarul into the play — he will be reciting lines at certain parts. “It was a fun process creating this production,” says Norzizi.

In Usikan Rebab, Norzizi has developed a modern theatre production infused with Mak Yong elements that will give audiences unfamiliar with the genre a taste of its beauty and cultural heritage. This is an original production that should not be passed up.

In Usikan Rebab, Norzizi has developed a modern theatre production infused with Mak Yong elements that will give audiences unfamiliar with the genre a taste of its beauty and cultural heritage.

Usikan Rebab will be staged at 8.30pm from April 18 to 21, and at 3pm on April 21 & 22, at Pentas 2, KL PAC, Sentul Park, Jalan Strachan, off Jalan Ipoh, KL. It will be performed in Kelantanese and Malay with English subtitles. Tickets are priced at RM33 and RM23. Call (03) 4047 9000 for more information.
Zamzuriah Zahari, an expert in Mak Yong, wrote Usikan Rebab and is acting in the monodrama.