The sound of change

Four roles. One performer. A traditional art form takes to the stage with a classic theme of generation gap. Subhadra Devan has the story.

Getting your children to follow in your footsteps is a challenging task for any parent. What more if the parent's a mak yong performer? Mak yong is Malaysia's first cultural heritage to be listed by Unesco in 2005 as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity".

But who watches it today? It's not like you can stumble across a staging at every corner of the road.

That's why the generational theme in The Actors Studio's Usikan Rebab may just hit home.

Usikan Rebab (loosely translated to mean Sound of the Rebab) is written and performed by National Arts Awards 2006 winner Zamzuriah Zahari. It's about a former mak yong artiste, Mak Nab, who is frustrated when her three daughters do not share her passion for the traditional art form.

According to the press release, "the story revolves around the divergence of religion, tradition and individualism in the current societal framework, where the traditional performing art of mak yong suffers a decline due to the focusing of priorities in other sectors of life."

Under the aegis of The Actors
Studio's Teater Rakyat, The Usikan Rebab is one more effort to bring local traditional performing arts to young people. Previous outings include Cantonese operas, Greek tragedy Medea and Titis Sakti, a mak yong play inspired by William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.

The latter two plays, and Usikan Rebab, are under the direction of Norzizi Zulkifli, a 36-year-old star of stage, film and TV.

Norzizi says she first saw the play, performed by Zamzuriah for her final-year project at Universiti Malaya, about four years ago.

On the advice and urging of Five Arts Centre's Datin Marion D'Cruz, Norzizi says she took about six months to develop the play into a full-length offering.

"Rehearsals started in February," adds this UiTM lecturer who studied mak yong for her diploma at the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy (Aswara).

"Usikan Rebab is a monodrama about mak yong. Zamzuriah wrote from her imagination. But there is a lot of resonance in real life. It is a generational issue, and very alive today. I find it a dark play," explains Norzizi who is contemplating adding elements of main puteri into the play. Main puteri is another traditional art form, with healing elements, that also involves the sound of the rebab (a fiddle with a limited range but valued for its voice-like tone).

For The Actors Studio's executive producer Datuk Faridah Merican, Usikan Rebab is "for the community and the country (as) we do not want the young to forget these art forms".

She recalls watching bangsawan, boria and other traditional theatre forms during her formative years in Penang. I'd like to see them again on the stage. I think television messed it all up," she muses.

"It took (these old) art forms and presented them in a bastardised form for the public. It was all shortened. I don't know why it cannot be shown in their true forms because maybe the public would find it boring or something. But they should and must.

"I remember watching Rahman B (Seniman Negara Abdul Rahman Abu Bakar) perform bangsawan at New World Park in Penang. Unforgettable."

Rahman B, currently a lecturer at Aswara, staged Laksamana Cheng Ho at the Panggung Bandaraya last year. "He's still doing bangsawan but laments that the pure aspect of the art form is being questioned by the authorities, by those giving the funds. They want new themes. But the young don't know the old stories so we should reintroduce them."

"What do we have on TV today? Karoot Komedia! What does that say about our performing arts? Mak yong has plenty of entertainment value. It is its own art form. It has its own conditions (for performance). Not everyone will agree with staging this art form. If you don't agree, don't come, but don't prevent it."

"I hope young people, those in schools and colleges will attend the show, so that they can have the same kind of experiences as I did."

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