

Ulasan / *Reviews*

Heritage Heboh - An Alternative Educational Success Story

Armenian Street, Pulau Pinang
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The words “learning” and “excitement” don’t generally go together when it refers to education in Malaysia. Even less do we find learning that happens with the students taking the initiative. Learning history facts without having to be force fed? Are you kidding? Making inquiries and doing further research without being asked so that they can better understand and look for answers to their individual questions? A MULTI-RACIAL group of students EXCITED about working together?

These and more were some of the successes of the *Heritage Heboh 2006* project that was sponsored by mobile phone operator, DIGI Telecommunications Sdn. Bhd., as part of its service to the community.

Conceived as an effort to provide arts education to local school children, *Heritage Heboh* was a culmination of the pioneering work of children’s theatre activist of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Janet Pillai, and a team of artists involved in heritage and arts education in Penang.

***Heritage Heboh* Beginnings**

Heritage Heboh has its roots as a programme called *Anak-anak Kota*, a heritage education program for young people organized by ARTS-ED, a collaborative initiative of the Penang Educational Consultative Council and School of Arts, USM.

The initial vision was firstly, to provide a balance to the mainly science-focused Malaysian education curriculum, and secondly, to raise the profile of the rich cultural and historical heritage in Penang. With this in mind, the *Anak-anak Kota* project framed the teaching of arts skills around the treasures found in the existing and built-up heritage (architecture, trades, crafts, customs, food) of Old Penang. Thus the young artists were introduced to movement and improvisation skills with source material that ranged from oral tradition (myths and legends) to frescoes carved on temple walls.

Anak-anak Kota's efforts at conservation and sustainability of local culture has been celebrated over and over again over the six years that the project has been in existence. From its beginnings in 2000, in the inner city of Georgetown, to its expansion to Balik Pulau in 2005, the programme's informal arts projects has successfully imbibed in Penang's multicultural teenagers a love for their island and a keen awareness of the events within their community.

In addition, *Anak-anak Kota* continues to provide an opportunity for the young to discover their roots and an opportunity to creatively express their connection with their environment through the arts disciplines of drama, music and visual art. The locating in the 'real' environment of the learning process (as opposed to a classroom), enhances the young artist's connection with his/her environment and allows them to live history, something history books cannot even attempt to duplicate.

Born of such beginnings, the *Heritage Heboh* programme evolved from the work of *Anak-anak Kota* and transformed into a neater and more compact programme that lasts four months.

Heritage Heboh's educational success story is mainly due to the vision of people who believed that there was untapped potential in arts education. That this continues to generate waves both as a performance of quality and as a very successful educational experiment is due to the experience and expertise of the *Heboh* team.

With Janet Pillai as artistic director, three separate disciplines worked individually and collaboratively to conceive and create the performance that was staged on the night of 15th July 2006.

The Music Team

The Music Team comprised the eminent ethnomusicologist, Tan Sooi Beng and two other graduate students from USM – Aki Uehara and Hafizah Jaafar. Together with teenage lyricists Natasha Khanum, Muna Mazlan, Oh Chin Eng and Ch'ng Yu Jean, they unfolded stories about sailors, spices, silk and secret societies – essentially the history of the different migrant communities in Penang and how they used to live.

The music, composed and written by Tan Sooi Beng was heavily influenced by the strains of the traditional *gamelan* and *wayang kulit* (shadow play) ensemble, while the lyrics, in *pantun*, were structured in the Penang traditional musical forms of *boria* and *dondang sayang*. With the understanding that music is sound and collections of sound constitute music, soundscapes were carefully recorded during the many field trips to pier sides, street markets, hawker stalls and coffee shops, all in the name of collecting sounds for their bank of resources. The final product was testimony to their research. What a wonderfully creative outcome made up of exact duplications of calls to prayer, interspersed with the strains of the *gamelan*. The story of Penang's early port dwellers was brought to life in the 30-minute musical performance by these student artists. The use of accents – Tamil, Mamak, Hokkien – and the liberal use in the musical composition coupled oddly but strangely well with modern rap. Verses were written by the students in the tradition of the early *tukang karang* – to satirise and storytell. *Pantun* writing took on a whole new meaning as the form gave expression to the stories they sought to tell.

The preparation for the performance was almost equivalent to a history research task. Why was this different? Perhaps the mode of learning took place out of the classroom. Perhaps the students had the opportunity to listen firsthand to history through the people who actually lived through the period? Perhaps it was because it made sense to them – the discovery of their heritage and how they fitted into the scheme of life in Malaysia.

The Dance Team

The 15-minute performance called *Borak-borak*, was an original piece utilising hip hop and modern dance concepts. Weaving vignettes of life on Penang's streets, *Borak-borak* captured Penangites passion for stall food and street life. Ever seen the *lok-lok lambada* or *rongeng roti jala*? What about *the traffic jam rock and roll*? After many sessions of observation of Penang street life and laborious experimentations using contemporary and traditional dance techniques, the choreographers successfully captured the rhythms and movements of hawker and customer, pedestrian and driver, tourist and local. The dance attempts to capture "living heritage" which is often difficult to document except through a dynamic medium such as video or dance. And thanks to the efforts of Penang-born Liu Yong Sean (a "dynamite" product of Penang's *Anak-anak Kota* and Young Theatre programmes currently studying dance at the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan), and assisted by professionals Eng Hee Ling and Katharine Chua, Penangites had a glimpse of themselves through the cheeky eyes of these movers and shakers who gyrated, shook and copied perfectly the little eccentricities that make Penang what it is.

The Puppet Show

Ask any young person if they would be excited to learn the *wayang kulit* and you might be lucky to get any kind of positive response. As an art form, this is dead-as-doornails old fashioned. But not to these 12 young visual artists who studied carved motifs on the heritage buildings, temples and furniture and learnt about the symbolism behind each motif. Learning the art of

carving into two dimensional puppets in the style of *wayang kulit*, they created a whole new art form, a contemporary mixture of old and new.

These artists also interviewed residents in the Inner city to collect oral stories for the narrative of their storytelling component. Their story choice told of a sea spirit which enters the body of a young boy who then begins to create havoc at home. His parents go to the Yap temple to get the help of a deity Hui Teck Choon. The final performance showcased the stunning achievements of these young people. Their original puppet performance, was an interesting amalgamation of shadow puppets, Chinese folk tale/legend retold in Bahasa Malaysia. The characters were also cosmopolitanly Malaysian – the nyonya mother, the disobedient son (which could have come from any cultural background), the shaman, the priest in the temple and the *sami*. Plus, the choice of narrative was something shared by all people in Malaysia – ghost stories and demon possession.

The main people in this category comprised David Yeoh, a wood carver and furniture restoration artist by trade and a well known figure in the Penang heritage scene; the versatile Ho Sheau Fung, actress and theatre director among Mandarin arts circles and a new media artist currently attached to the Penang Heritage Trust.

Showtime 15th July 2006

Penang came out in full force to witness what has become a staple diet of the people living in the area, thanks to *Anak-anak Kota*. The past few years' experience with Mr Love Lane's antics (of *Anak-anak Kota* fame) had primed and prepared the residents in the vicinity to expect a fantastic show to rival any in Kuala Lumpur.

The climax of the four month programme culminated in a huge street party performance on 15th July 2006 amidst a transformed Armenian Street Square in Inner City Penang. The area around

and in Cannon Square (Khoo Kongsi) and the surrounding areas of Armenian street were cordoned off to traffic, taken over by cables and more cables of sound and lighting equipment, video and television cameras and other technical equipment.

What most impressed this writer was the cohesiveness of each performance, the tight routines and the very professional way of each and every performer in the troupe. The performers had worked extremely hard and were justifiably proud of how far they had come. As in any group endeavour, friendships were formed and cemented born of the common experience of creating a unique piece of art.

During the preliminary auditions which initially attracted a large crowd of Malaysian students from all walks of life and races, the realization that being selected counted for a lot because competition was stiff and selection was based totally on merit. Each performer already knew that he or she brought into the collective a certain amount of natural talent. But the process of honing the collective group, the challenge for the artists in residence, not only saw the development of these but the understanding that what they did achieve was born of collaboration. Individually they would never have created the amazing performance that was the outcome of the four months of sweat and tears.

In addition, the collective experience of being taken on tours in the community, meeting and interacting with members of the community and hearing stories about a bygone era, gave them a combined sense of a shared history, that made more sense to them than reading the same stories from history books. The fact that history is about the lives of people and events that took place made sense but only because the people sharing those stories had actually lived through those events – the Second World War, the Japanese occupation, the period of Communism - and how that has shaped the living of the present.

Although what stood out most significantly was the quality of the performance and the evident pride at showcasing a piece of original work, something else seems to have begun to take place

in their psyche – I could be a romantic, an idealist, an optimist – but in these young people the seeds of a truly Malaysian Malaysia have been sowed and will hopefully be nurtured and in turn nurture others to become conscious of ownership of a wonderful, exciting unique collective history – one that the history writers forgot to include in history books.

The learning took place on three levels – the visual, the kinaesthetic and the aural – and there was synergy and unity, and a common sense of pride for the whole. At the end of the day, each had gained in addition to the art skills that they focused on, a clearer understanding of who they were and a better appreciation of each other and their common heritage as Malaysians. While the process of making art is fun, the fact does remain that the students learn about themselves, about who they are in relation to their peers. This discovery that they are more than the sum of the total encourages individual thought and builds confidence in their individual ability.

Education churns out masses of people who mostly think the same, and it is this that has kept us (Asians) submissive to more innovative and critical streams of new ideas. By the whole process of sharing ideas, negotiating, creating, analysing, evaluating, re-creating, re-evaluating, the students are learning the basis of creating, whether it be a new piece of art, music or even the invention of new systems. If all these skills continue to be nurtured, we will have produced a workforce that can think laterally and solve problems, and Malaysian can look forward to welcoming the innovative and creative inventors of the future.

It was a wonderful experience for this jaded writer to watch young Malaysians interacting without being in the usual polarized groups and genuinely supporting the collective. There's hope yet!

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Photo 1 Dance about eating at the *Penang Coffeeshop*



Photo 2 Wayang bayang-bayang



Photo 3 Playing the *gamelan* in *Kisah Pulau Pinang*



Photo 4 Making Puppets