

Cultivating confidence through dance

► Local academy dedicated 25 years to teaching *Bharatanatyam* to underprivileged students, providing them with sense of belonging, pride and purpose

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KUALA LUMPUR: Some 25 years ago, a Tamil school in Bangsar was in dire need of books, stationery, computers and tutoring in English, Mathematics and other subjects.

Some doctors, lawyers and other professionals decided to pitch in and purchase what was needed for them as most of the primary and secondary school students there were from poor families.

However, while giving the school the equipment it needed was important, the students perceived tutoring as merely an extension of their schooling.

This is where the Mahavidya Dance Theatre, founded in 2001 by Sheela Raghavan, entered the scene. An accomplished *Bharatanatyam* dancer, she started teaching the pupils dance to give them a sense of belonging.

"I have always believed dance can be a unifying channel that would give them the self-confidence and pride they needed.

"It was tough at first as we had to convince parents to send their children for classes although they were free and held just once a week for beginners. We were also short of money for their costumes, which includes silk *sarees*, imitation jewellery, anklets and other items.

required for public performances.⁸

Sheela said some people looked at her dancers with disdain because of this. But *saree* shops chipped in and so did those that sold imitation jewellery and other items so the children could be properly attired.

The Mahavidya Dance Theatre is unique in that Sheela teaches the *Vazhuvoor* style, which is one of the four original styles of *Bharatanatyam*.

Soon, word spread and before long, the dance theatre was invited to put on shows, which Sheela gladly accepted. *Bharatanatyam* opened the children to a world of performing arts and music they previously did not know existed.

"One could see the transformation in the children once they were on stage. They beamed with pride as they danced to script and put on flawless performances that were appreciated by the audience."

The self-confidence of the children grew to the point that even their studies improved. Seeing this, children from more well-off families were also sent to learn *Bharatanatyam* from her.

On average, Sheela puts on about two performances a month and more during auspicious Hindu festivals such as *Deepavali*, *Navarathri* (a nine-day Hindu festival in honour of the Goddess Durga) and others.

"Over the years, I have trained more than 300 dancers. The number seems small for that



R. Shavena (left) and P. Harshna, two senior dancers who will be performing in 'Reflections' on July 5 and 6 – **PIC COURTESY OF MAHAVIDYA DANCE THEATRE**

many years, but there are only about 20 students at each intake."

Today, the senior students she taught years ago are being trained to teach as they have vast experience as *Bharatanatyam* dancers, having performed in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries.

The Mahavidya Dance Theatre will be showcasing a performance called "Reflections", which combines theatre, *Bharatanatyam* and folk dances, and multimedia projections with English subtitles, so the audience can follow the storyline.

The event will take place over two nights on July 5 and 6 at the Damansara Performing Arts Centre.

"Reflections brings to life the legendary tale of *Garuda*, the part-eagle and part-human who is king of the birds, according to Hindu mythology. He is also the vehicle

for Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe.

"In one tale, Garuda seeks the nectar of immortality and our performance reimagines the deity seeking the counsel of his *guru* as he sets out on his quest."

Sheela said the 20 dancers who will be performing over the two days include her senior students, who have made good in their lives and careers.

"They have graduated in actuarial science, accounting and finance, psychology and other disciplines and are returning to perform for a good cause."

For more details and to attend the performance, please contact Mahavidya Dance Theatre on Instagram or Facebook, or reach them via WhatsApp at 016-225 6993.

Proceeds from tickets priced at RM38 will go towards supporting arts education for underprivileged children in the Klang Valley.

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Health screening, education for indigenous communities in S'wak

PETALING JAYA: Kuala Lumpur-based Yayasan Kesenian Orang Asli (YKOA) has started a comprehensive week-long health screening and education programme in three remote indigenous community villages in Barisan Highlands Sapuak.

It has been carried out since June 13 in collaboration with the district health office at Long Seridan, Long Meraan and Long Balau, situated in between Mount Mulu and Basia Highlands.

The health screening will benefit the *Penan*, *Kelabit* and *Saban* communities.

Sponsored by the Australian High Commission and Klinik Leela Ratos, YKOA director Datin Pearl Mohan said the initiative was important in providing essential medical care to underserved communities in rural Sarawak.

The objectives of the programme include imparting essential health knowledge to the local populace, extending non-communicable disease outreach, health screenings for women and fostering a

healthy, active and collaborative community.

"By conducting health screenings and providing health education talks to indigenous residents, we not only make inroads into their health but help build a framework for the needs of isolated communities," said YKOA chairman Dr Andre Ratos.

He said the initiative underscores its ongoing commitment to improving healthcare accessibility and education.

Ratos cited poor access to doctors, the burden of travel costs and reluctance to seek healthcare as among the challenges faced by the indigenous communities.

He said the programme was also aimed at building rapport and treating, educating and encouraging indigenous individuals to seek follow-up or surgical care at district hospitals.

Established in 2002, YKOA was founded by Dr Leela Ratos to elevate indigenous livelihood and preserve their culture.