

KEEPING TRADITION ALIVE

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO GLOVE PUPPETS OF OLD

A vintage puppet hoard discovery leads **Alan Teh Leam Seng** into George Town's core heritage zone, where a team of young enthusiasts is breaking new ground in its noble quest to revive an ancient art form



THE antique shop's cool interior offers welcome respite from the sweltering afternoon heat. Before long, the incessant weekend George Town traffic battled minutes earlier is pleasantly replaced by floor-to-ceiling display cabinets filled to the brim with curiosities ready for ferreting.

Eventually, a badly faded dust-covered box catches the eye. Determined to leave no stone unturned with hopes of uncovering long forgotten treasures, it is gingerly retrieved with quivering hands and placed on a nearby century-old table. The quiet shuffling of feet brings the proprietor close as his interest is also piqued by the chance discovery.

ANCIENT ART FORM

Hearts pound as flaps fly open, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. When the air clears, utter shock overwhelms and gasps reverberate as miniature heads with lifelike facial features stare back from the box's dark depths. Initially thought as Amazonian shrunken heads, they turned out to be clay glove puppet remnants whose fabric bodies have long disintegrated.

Postulating that his father could have squirrelled away these forgotten cultural treasures decades ago, the proprietor agrees to sell them at a nominal fee after considering their vastly deteriorated state and current lack of interest among collectors.

While packing the items individually in bubble wrap, he takes the opportunity to reminisce of earlier days when this traditional art form was a common in Malaya.

Said to have originated in China some three centuries ago, glove puppet theatre reached our shores in the late 19th century with the arrival of skilled puppeteers in search of greener pastures. Closely intertwined with Chinese immigrant social life, the Potehi became part of various religious festivals at temples and ancestral homes that lacked financial resources to hire expensive live opera troupes.

Apart from costing just an eighth of the fee charged by live operas, makeshift Potehi stages were rudimentary and could be set up within hours at temple grounds or amusement parks. Covered in front with a multi-coloured wooden panel featuring the troupe's name and images of dragons, phoenixes and fairies, the open-air stage is shielded on the remaining sides by large sheets of cloth that can be rolled back to improve ventilation.

With basic stage designs remaining relatively unchanged until today, the front wooden panel also featured a rectangle opening where the proscenium is attached. Attractive backdrops are then used to obscure the view of puppeteers and musicians at the back.

When held during religious commemorations, the stage is erected opposite the temple so that deities will have an unobstructed view of the performances. Devoid of chairs, most spectators stand facing the stage with their backs to the temple while others watch from the sides, which offer glimpses of puppeteers and musicians hard at work.

Potehi performances are large-



The front section of the stage features a multi-coloured wooden panel with the troupe's name and various striking motifs. PIX COURTESY OF ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

ly informal, with spectators moving about freely while talking and shouting with minimal restraint. When ravenous, they visit the plethora of hawker stalls at the periphery to purchase snacks and drinks before inching as close as possible back to the stage to enjoy unobstructed views of the puppets in the thick of action.

PUPPET ATTRIBUTES

Quite similar to the British Punch and Judy characters, Potehi glove puppets each consist of a head, hands, feet and a cloth body that fits snugly over the hand. Averaging less than 30cm in height, the puppets come in nearly all imaginable shapes and costume designs, which signify their individual personalities and social status. Numbering at least 40, well-established troupes can own up to 100 dolls ranging from powerful kings to lowly servants.

While wrapping the last two puppet heads, the proprietor points out that early versions were either carved from wood or moulded from clay before a layer of protective wax was applied. As in live opera performances, facial features, especially eyebrows and eyes, formed important distinguishing features.

While benevolent characters have straight brows that are broad on top and converge towards the nose, restless cowards



Decades-old puppet heads discovered at the antique shop.

and undesirable characters are assigned upturned or drooping ones. Dotted brows with broken patterns are drawn on those who are ferocious and hostile.

Apart from small eyes for gentle characters like women, facial colour also helps to define personality. Faces of those with important roles are painted white while servants and labourers have pinkish-brown ones.

Although the hair on all the heads have long fallen off, the

holes where they were once attached are still visible. Aided by the shop owner's vivid explanation, it is easy to picture newly made ones with thick beards and whiskers made from real human hair. Like other attributes, facial hair shape, size and colour vary from puppet to puppet, with the exception of female and young male characters.

Court jesters, for example, are given a variety of beard styles to make them appear comical while



Ombak Potehi leader Marcus Lim Chin Keong skilfully manipulating the puppets during the rehearsal.

experience working with older and more established Penang troupes, Lim and his peers confidently make puppets juggle with weapons, perform somersaults, carry out violent fight scenes as well as many other gravity-defying acrobatic feats. Providing further visual effects, objects like swords, fans and canes are easily affixed on puppet hands, which form perforated clenched fists.

Like apprentices of the past, Ombak Potehi members painstakingly adhere to specific stage conventions and procedures involving glove puppet gestures, like walking, opening or closing of doors and even mounting and dismounting horses. At the same time, they take pride that the ability to deploy lifelike cardboard animal versions give puppet theatres a greater degree of realism compared with live opera, which are mostly

minute changes to the plot that revolves around a legendary Chinese princess who sails to Melaka to wed Sultan Mansur Shah.

Arriving in the nick of time to witness an arrogant Majapahit prince challenge the Melaka sultan's authority, the quick-witted princess bravely steps forward to thwart the disrespectful plan and, at the same time, help defend the sultan's honour. In gratitude for the timely assistance, Sultan Mansur Shah bestows upon her the title of Puteri Hang Li Po.

Among the many commendable attributes of this production, it is the costumes that stood out most prominently during the rehearsal.

While the ones worn by puppets portraying Hang Li Po and her lady-in-waiting were a reflection of ancient Chinese dresses, Ombak Potehi must be lauded for going the extra mile in ensur-

Bursting with energy and performing with uncompromising commitment, this youthful collective



Ombak Potehi members employ technology like iPads to keep track of dialogue scripts to ensure successful performances.

lead characters, like judges, are recognised by their long, full grey or white beards that cover the mouth and extends to the chest.

YOUTHFUL REVIVAL

Exiting the shop and making a beeline back to my room at the Cititel Express Penang in Lebuhraya Noordin to keep the priceless artefacts, centuries-old ancestral temples encountered along the way are gazed upon with new eyes as many of them could have been venues for captivating glove puppet performances many decades ago. Still excited about the chance find, Potehi of the past continue to dominate thoughts for the remainder of the afternoon and the reminiscences remain unabated even during a sumptuous seafood buffet dinner at nearby Wembley Cafe.

A pleasant after-dinner walk with a stunning sunset serving as backdrop leads right into George Town's core heritage zone.

While admiring interesting

pre-war shophouse facades along Lorong Tok Aka, melodious tunes not unlike those heard at traditional opera performances suddenly fill the air. Tracing the serenade to its source with piqued interest, the trail ends at an unassuming double-storey terrace building.

Just as the Glove Puppet Show sign above the entrance sends my heart racing, someone dashes past before pausing to unlatch the metal door grille. Noticing my presence, he turns around and smiles warmly. That icebreaker literally opened the door into the more recent but equally intriguing world of modern glove puppetry.

Leading the way into the fluorescent lit interior, Marcus Lim Chin Keong introduces me to the remaining 11 Ombak Potehi glove puppet troupe members who are in the final stages of preparation for their scheduled George Town Festival performance next week. With ages ranging from the late teens and to mid-20s, this highly



Each puppet is meticulously inspected.

passionate multiracial ensemble dispels the widely held belief that the glove puppet theatre is in its sunset years.

Even though many members hail from mainland Penang as well as parts of the island far from George Town, distance is not a deterring factor for them to assemble here without fail after work thrice weekly. This level of enthusiasm speaks volumes of their enduring dedication towards the common interest.

Observing from a quiet corner, the next two hours prove to be a thoroughly eye-opening experience. Although Lim, who works full-time as an information technology purchasing planner, and his team members make puppet manipulation appear easy, this perception can be deceiving as the skill actually takes ages and a high degree of patience to master.

LOCAL FLAVOUR

With more than eight years of

restricted to symbolic item usage like whips to represent horses.

Bursting with energy and performing with uncompromising commitment, this youthful collective breathes new life into the ancient art form and provides it with a refreshing approach filled with local flavour to suit nearly all segments of Malaysia's multiracial society, especially the younger generation.

Used until this very day, traditional puppet repertoires boast of more than 200 plays and stories about the life and deeds of emperors, generals and the aristocracy as well as those that focus on romances between scholars and beautiful maidens, highlighting the sadness of separation and the joy of their eventual reunion. Equally popular are fantasy tales about fairies, benevolent spirits and destructive demons.

While most drama plots used by traditional glove puppet troupes hail from the Sung Dynasty era, Ombak Potehi members prefer to draw inspiration from local historical events, especially popular Melaka Sultanate occurrences, before coming up with original interpretational plays that resonate with the audience.

A DATE TO REMEMBER

With barely a week to go before Potehi Puteri Hang Li Po premiers at George Town Festival 2022, it is indeed an honour to watch them smooth out the rough edges while making last-

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ing that those that clothed Sultan Mansur Shah and his trusted minister Tun Mutahir bore close resemblance to traditional Malay garments and accessories, right down to the chequered sarong, regal kain songket as well as the tengkolok and song-kok head-dresses.

During the rehearsal, the captivating parade of different clothing styles and patterns

are complemented to a tee by dialogue that successfully captures the very essence of each scene. Although narrated in a combination of old Hokkien dialect, which is seldom understood by the younger generation today, Bahasa Melayu and English, the storyline is easy to follow as a screen below the stage provides useful multilingual subtitles.

If this enthralling rehearsal is anything to go by, visitors will be in for an amazing experience when the full performance is played out within the grounds of the historic Seh Tek Tong Cheah Kongsu in Lebuhraya Pantai for two evenings from today.

During the walk back to Cititel Express Penang, my heart is light with thoughts of the youthful Ombak Potehi members working tirelessly to keep the glove puppet flame alive.

Hopefully, their dedication will serve as inspiration to help spur others from their generation to follow in their footsteps and secure the future of Malaysia's other threatened traditional art forms before they disappear into oblivion.