

| In the Name of Art |

The Next Move

In modern Singapore, it is easy to overlook the art forms that have upheld tradition and brought communities together. Veterans from three different types of traditional dances share their thoughts on passing the baton on to the next generation, as well as their plans on keeping the traditional dance scene vibrant in a technology-centric city like ours

By Amelia Yeo



Mother's Mother (2006) by the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre. **Opposite page, from top:** *Onak Samudera* by Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts traced the lives of three prolific Malay dance choreographers, including Som Said; *Marabu - The First Ripple*, choreographed by Indian dance veteran Santha Bhaskar

Images: Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre; Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts; Bhaskar's Arts Academy





GROWING ROOTS

When Santha Bhaskar first joined Bhaskar's Academy of Dance in 1955 after her marriage to the late KP Bhaskar, who founded the company three years prior, she had to quickly adapt to conducting dance lessons. That did not come easy for the Kerala-born dancer who had no teaching experience. "I had no idea how to teach," she notes in a Zoom interview with granddaughter Malini Bhaskar. "Learning dance and music was a way of life for me growing up. I never liked it, but my father wanted me to learn the art form and thought I was quite talented at dancing. When I came to Singapore and was asked to teach [dance] by my late husband, I simply performed in front of my students and asked them to learn through imitation."

Santha teaches Bharatanatyam, which is the oldest classical Indian dance form that originated in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The dance movements are characterised by rhythmic footwork, bent legs, and highly stylised gestures to convey a dramatic mood or spiritual narrative. Over the next 10 years, she commuted between Singapore and Malaysia to conduct lessons in order to make a living. She shares, "Singapore was still young and the population was very small so we had to travel to Malaysia to conduct dance lessons for a fee of \$5 per head every month." Today, Santha, who received the Cultural Medallion in 1990 for her contributions to dance, refuses to stop teaching and still is the artistic director of the company, which is now known as Bhaskar's Arts Academy (BAA).

"I don't want to take a break," says the 80-year-old, who even conducted Zoom lessons for her alumni students, all of whom have been learning from her in the

From left to right: Cultural Medallion (1990) recipient and Indian dance veteran Santha Bhaskar; Santha's granddaughter, Malini Bhaskar (pictured right), in a production of *Marabu – The First Ripple*, staged at the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in November 2019



past 40 years, during Singapore's circuit breaker period in its fight against Covid-19. She admits she prefers teaching and choreographing to performing. "I love seeing the product of my choreography on stage, as well as to groom the next generation of performers."

BAA has come a long way since its founding years. Singapore's premier Indian performing arts group, which counts both Santha's daughter, Meenakshy, and Malini as its core members, also has a dedicated teaching wing in the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (NAS). The non-profit teaching institution, with more than 800 students enrolled, offers courses in dance, music, theatre and yoga.

Malini attributes her passion for dance to Santha. "I have always been very close to my grandma, but I was never expected to take on Indian classical dance professionally. In fact, us grandchildren were taught to pur-

sue our own interests from a young age." She has been dancing since childhood and now practises full-time at BAA, and holds her own children's dance lessons at NAS. She recalls visiting Santha during dance rehearsals, or listening to music and watching performance recordings when she stayed over at her grandmother's house. "That was how I started," shares the 25-year-old. "I wanted to be like her—on stage, performing in full costume and make-up."

It is obvious that the two have a unique bond built on trust, mutual respect and a shared passion for their craft. "Malini often provides me with her opinions as I choreograph dances these days and I respect her thoughts," says Santha. Similarly, Malini acknowledges how her grandmother is open to feedback and suggestions and also welcomes ideas by the company's dancers. "She's slowly grooming me to try choreography. In fact, just last year

I made my debut as a choreographer in one of my grandma's shows."

To both women, the possibilities for Indian dance choreography are limitless and that has helped them in keeping up with the times. In 2016 and 2017, Santha worked closely with a group of mathematicians and physicists to create a dance inspired by quantum entanglement, a topic in quantum physics. The performance was subsequently staged as part of the National University of Singapore's Arts Festival, where the performers' movements resembled that of electrons and photons. "You can choreograph just about anything in Indian dance," Malini expounds. "People are attracted to Bharatanatyam for its raw and traditional style, but instead of doing *Ramayana* or another similar epic, you can definitely give the performance a contemporary twist and take on a modern-day topic—such as quantum physics!"

BETTER TOGETHER

Speaking with Som Said and her son, Adel Ahmad, one can immediately sense the warm relationship between mother and son. And this familial warmth also extends to the workplace, given that Adel now leads Singapore's first fully professional Malay dance company, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts, that his mother founded in 1997.

Sri Warisan is a complete family affair: Som oversees all artistic decisions, while her husband Ahmad Sawal manages the company's finances. Adel serves as the managing director, and his wife Marina Yusoff spearheads the marketing division.

"My succession plan was executed in merely five years!" Som, a 1987 Cultural Medallion recipient, says half-jokingly. "When Adel came on board in 2000 after returning from his studies in Canada, he was able to modernise Sri Warisan, while I made sure that the practice stays rooted to tradition."

Malay dance consists of five main types, namely *joget*, *masri*, *inang*, *asli* and *zapin*, each characterised by a distinctive style, rhythm and music. The *asli*, for example, is a slow and graceful dance that follows the beat of the gong in counts of eight, while the *joget* is quick in tempo and often accompanied by the accordion, violin, and *tambur*, a double-headed drum of Portuguese origins.

One of the first decisions Adel made when he joined the company was to digitise its operations, followed by a desire to take its practice abroad for international audiences to appreciate. "Then, I wanted Sri Warisan to tour 100 cities in the next 20 years," shares Adel proudly, knowing full well that his target was met in 2016. Coincidentally, this year marks the 20th year since he joined the company, and it holds an impressive record

of performances standing at 102 cities in 40 countries to date. Apart from showcasing what the arts in Singapore and Malay dance have to offer, performing abroad has a multitude of benefits for the company's dancers too. He says, "Our dancers learn something new at every festival and use that knowledge to train others." For Som, this statement rings especially true. "I have travelled the world and know what it means for a dancer to showcase their craft and truly represent Singapore and our stories."

Additionally, Adel's initial determination to adopt the use of technology becomes even more relevant today as the arts sector finds its way through the current Covid-19 pandemic. He acknowledges that till today, "the traditional arts world is still perceived as boring. Therefore, to grab the attention of wider audiences, we have to showcase works that are captivating and relevant to the Singapore community." Sri Warisan has shortened its *wayang kulit* performances to 30 minutes from its original length of eight to 10 hours, and incorporated modern elements like LED graphics and animation into their Malay dance performances. Adel shares, "Ultimately, we wish for the traditional arts to remain relevant to and be enticing for the younger generation."

But the key to grooming a new wave of talent, according to Som, is to start them young. Today, the company runs the Sri Warisan Academy of Performing Arts, its own arts education programme supported by the National Arts Council. Classes are split into three student categories—children, youth and adult. But unlike conventional dance classes with a syllabus and exams, the teaching wing prioritises the need to inculcate values of wisdom and respect, along with the cultural and artistic values of the dance, done through mentoring during classes. "The path to being a professional performer is two-pronged," says Som. "Before we identify their artistic talent, they must possess the important values that go beyond their tangible skill set."



From left to right: The 2019 production of *Lebaran Tales*, performed by Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts; Malay dance veteran Som Said, who was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1987



"Our dancers learn something new at every overseas festival and use that knowledge to train others"—ADEL AHMAD



Clockwise, from above: Jenny Neo getting her make-up ready backstage; the 2014 production of *A Startling Dream* by the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre (SCDT), featuring Neo; SCDT artistic director Lim Moi Kim in full stage make-up, a look that is often seen in Peking opera performances



STEPS TO SUCCESS

The dichotomy of “traditional” versus “modern” is often discussed in the performing arts scene today. But Lim Moi Kim, artistic director of the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre (SCDT), remains confident about keeping the traditional Chinese dance form alive in the country.

“SDCT now has 11 schools under its care, with students following a programme that enriches their knowledge and learning of Chinese dance,” says Lim, adding that she is not worried about a lack of interest in the practice among the young. “Because of that, I am positive about the future of Chinese dance in Singapore.”

Traditional Chinese dance is classified into two types: classical dance and ethnic folk dance. The former has

movements similar to Chinese martial arts, comprising of dynamic leaps and graceful aerial techniques, while the latter offers an insight into the cultures, customs and characteristics of 56 ethnic groups in China. It is also a part of SCDT’s graded examination syllabus, where students have 15 grades to complete.

During the late 1990s, the dance troupe was an amateur outfit helmed by Lim and was part of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, a dedicated cultural and educational foundation. It turned professional only in 2014 after plans to receive funding from the National Arts Council were approved a year before. Today, Lim continues to choreograph performances and teaches alongside her daughter, Jenny Neo, who currently heads SCDT’s outreach and education department.

“Our choreographies do not actually take on a very traditional dance style,” Neo says, explaining the common misconception towards Chinese dance. “In fact, what we do is make use of the values entrenched in Chinese tradition to spearhead the narratives of our performances. Besides, we also have to take into consideration the relevance of each story to today’s audiences.”

In rolling with the times, SCDT has most recently taken advantage of today’s technologies to bring their programmes online for all to access. “We have two ongoing Chinese dance lessons for children aged three to six and adults conducted through our Facebook page,” she notes. While she very much prefers physical lessons, “the response has been overwhelming as it still allows our students to practise in the comfort of their homes.”

Neo devoted her formative years and subsequent career to Chinese dance. Her first foray into the art form was through her mother, as she would watch Lim perform and rehearse. “I only started training formally with my mother in 1989, but my passion was sparked when I watched her perform on stage, thinking that could someday be me too,” she shares. However, like most parents, Lim had wished for Neo to prioritise her academic studies above all. But Lim knew that passion for the craft was of utmost importance. “A performer’s intuition is crucial, and Jenny has what it takes in that aspect,” says Lim. “She also has a special way of choreographing that is different to mine, which is excellent as she has defined a style that is unique to her and brings new ideas to the table.”

Following her training at the then-Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Dance Theatre, Neo was awarded a scholarship in 2004 to further her practice at the Beijing Dance Academy and returned to graduate from the Lasalle College of the Arts five years later. Currently, she has taken on the task to expose young and aspiring performers to different aspects of Chinese dance, but still looks up to her mother for advice on curriculum-related materials. She shares, “My mother has spent her life nurturing the next wave of talent, and that has influenced me to work even harder.” To encourage a greater interest towards Chinese dance and motivate its dancers, SCDT has organised annual performances for the young ones to perform with other troupes from schools and community centres in Singapore.

Lim acknowledges that in order to sustain the public’s interest in Chinese dance in Singapore, more performances have to be developed to not only appeal to the masses, but to maintain an aesthetic that speaks to the quality of the craft and the dancers. “It is important to raise the bar for our performers and have them continually improve on their techniques and skill sets,” she shares. “Finding that balance is how we can elevate the dance form to a whole new level.”

On the other hand, Neo thinks it’s important to keep young dancers engaged. “Chinese dance techniques are incredibly difficult to learn. When it comes to younger children, they need to truly love the dance and be inspired by their teachers—only then will they be willing to make sacrifices in the pursuit of art.”