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Preparing Khoo Kongsi Temple for the night event



Chung Wei announces the start of the Trade Fair



Making Chinese Lanterns

Street Smart Heritage
Zedeck Siew meanders through the streets of Penang and witnesses an amazing Malaysian at work.

by Zedeck Siew
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The entrance to Khoo Kongsi, perhaps one of Penang's most iconic locations, is a *porte cochere* that precedes facing rows of empty shophouses; buntings line this street tonight, announcing DiGi's "Amazing Malaysians" and "Madame Heritage Heboh". Up ahead, a banner saying *Anak-anak Kota* spans the wall that is the back-end of an ornate opera stage.

Janet Pillai is seated on some steps nearby, trying to hold court with children roughly her size, saying: "Yes, that run, your run now is very good," and cheers briefly overwhelm the sound of her voice, "But you've to watch your reactions to what he's saying onstage, don't say your lines all at once. You cannot overshadow him when he sings."

The kids' rehearsals are over, though, because it is soon ten-thirty, and time for them to go home. But Janet's work isn't over: there are still night-before-the-show headaches to oversee and she comes up to me, saying: "Sorry, sorry, I completely forgot about you, did you wait long? Just give me a moment, I need to see Yudi's run."

We sit down and watch Shanghai-style songstress Yudi sing *Dayung Sampan* and *Ayoh Mama*. There's a mirrorball hanging from the opera stage's rafters, and a spotlight trails her. The flyers for the Heritage Heboh Street Festival include an old-fashioned Konset announcement, inviting audiences to:

"experience the memories of Great World Park Pulau Pinang's golden age ... Young or old, we all have nostalgia for the songs of the 1920s ... 30s ... 40s ..."

The Great World Park, I discover, was an art deco edifice, built in Georgetown in the 1920s: perhaps the region's first entertainment mall, housing Bangsawan stages, clubs, joget halls, and a cinema – the physical manifestation of Penang's infamous secret societies going legit.

Then Yudi pauses to confer with her musicians and the lights operator, and Janet says: "It looks like I can finally leave. I need a drink." We are just passing the Digi buntings when her phone rings. They want her to go over the cues.

Madame Heboh

Janet Pillai chose the Madame Heritage Heboh moniker herself; Georgetown's Heritage Heboh Street Festival last July 15th was the result of her appointment as one of telecommunications conglomerate DiGi's "Amazing Malaysians": a corporate social responsibility programme that recognises and supports individuals who are outstanding leaders in the field of heritage and conservation.

"Amazing Malaysians" is notable because it deviates from the publicity-driven and ultimately ineffective Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) norm; the programme works by creating itineraries, often months-long, that introduce children and youth to heritage issues of its appointed organisations in an in-depth and systematic way. "They were very good," Janet told me. "They offered to plan the whole thing out for us."

They didn't need to. As chairperson of Arts Education, a USM Penang and Penang State Educational Consultative Council joint initiative, Janet is behind Arts Ed's largest project, *Anak-anak Kota*. Begun in 2000, *Anak-anak Kota* has been behind annual research-based programmes tasked with educating kids about Georgetown heritage and cultural identity through the arts. The mechanisms were there, but corporate support would mean they would work at an unprecedented level.



Kneading flour dough



Making dessert



Threading jasmine garlands



Janet Pillai

In March the project dispatched sixty young Penangites, aged 11 to 18, into inner Georgetown: loose, they collected oral history, recorded practices, and learned to observe the human movements and soundscapes of these locales. In June, they workshopped under the tutelage of visual artists, dancers and musicians, turning the accumulated material into artistry.

The object: a night-long performance, expressing the traditions of the inner city through visual arts, dance and music. "This is more for the people of the inner city. It's our way of giving back to the community. We felt that, after all the oral history they had to share, all the interviews - we've taken so much and we want to give back to them."

The Heritage Heboh Street Festival was huge. That Saturday night, there were banners everywhere along Kapitan Keling Street. Pitt Street and Armenian Street were cordoned off, there were a gaggle of state dignitaries at the VIP reception, and there was the promise of lights and spectacle.

Development 101

I had arrived in Penang two days before Saturday, the first time in conscious memory, with a group of Australian architects-in-training; my brother-in-law is a lecturer at Curtin University, and I had insinuated myself into his study tour. On Friday morning we attended a presentation by the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) about its purposes and practices.

Founded in the 1960s, the PDC was a stopgap measure during Penang's economic slump: Penang had lost its free port status, Bayan Lepas was a dead town, and Georgetown was frozen in time. Something had to be done, and that something, it was decided, would be urbanisation. And urbanisation with a socially-aware streak, too: one of the PDC's point-form aims is to "Restructure society by integrating peoples of different ethnic and income groups through a policy of mixed allocation of residential/commercial facilities built."

An aim that was quite obviously, even to my Australian companions, a manifestation of the New Economic Policy's 'membasmi kemiskinan' mission statement.

There are similar development corporations in every state of the federation and it is these bodies that are responsible for the construction - in the name of Wawasan 2020 Progress - of townships wholesale. Personally, I am most familiar with Nilai, one such projected boomtown on the Selangor-Negeri Sembilan border that banked on the economic draw of KLIA for its success. The place looks haunted now: rows and rows of empty shop-lots and industrial spaces with shutters advertising dozens of realtor stickers, pasted and torn off and pasted again.

The PDC town planner giving us the presentation that morning projected a map of Bayan Baru, built over existing villages and communities, and we saw areas designated low-cost, medium-cost, high-cost, huddled together and mismatched. We were also told there was an ethnicity-based quota for prospective home-seekers. "The neighbours would always be of a different race, and their kids would go to the same schools, so they would be forced to react."

The architecture undergraduates scoffed, and I asked perhaps the most obvious question myself: "Does the PDC have control of, or statistics on, resale of these properties?" He didn't answer my question. The response to another question about possible social unease was: "You can put up fences."

Where Great World Park was, Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak now stands. The PDC's most recent project is the revitalisation of the city blocks around KOMTAR, that currently-derelict 65-storey, once-tallest-in-Asia phallus that most people in Georgetown hate. One of my friends asked the town planner whether he agreed that KOMTAR was perhaps incongruous with the cityscape,



Buntings



Participants break out into spontaneous dancing on the street before it was even cordoned off



The sarong in reference



Interactive dinner performance tells the story of early Chinese immigrants

and better left to be discarded.

"This is true," our presenter said, "Maybe the solution," he continued, smiling, half-joking, but probably not, "Is to build high-rises all around it."

Mr Lovelane

A character known as Mr. Lovelane, with his pith helmet, thick glasses and a fake moustache, is the face of *Anak-anak Kota*. "He's our bridge to the inner city," Janet says. "Everyone from the area knows this festival as a Lovelane thing more than a DiGi thing."

Mr. Lovelane was designed in 2000 by both Janet and Goh Hun Meng, the project's graphic designer. He appears in flyers, banners and press kit, but Mr. Lovelane's popularity is mainly due to the fact that Hun Meng actually channels him as a verbally reticent but physically animated man.

"I started playing him because I was interested in drama," Hun Meng tells me. "But it's a very strange feeling. I go through a lot of emotions. It's a kind of consolation, putting myself into this character, a self-recognition. Because I personally went through the issues."

Hun Meng first worked with Janet on the Penang Arts Festival in 1999, but joined in earnest a year later. 2000 was the year rent controls were repealed nation-wide, and this hit Georgetown particularly hard: the British-instituted laws that kept leases at affordable prices were suddenly gone and landlords, now gleeful at the mercenary opportunities their historic properties afforded, ensured that rates were at levels most inner city households could not afford.

"So all the families living here were evicted," Janet told me that Friday night, walking by the empty shophouses of the Khoo Kongsi. "It was very controversial. Sure, they got some sort of compensation, but the houses they were offered were sometimes miles away from Georgetown."

"My family lived in Khoo Kongsi since my grandmother's time: about ninety years," Hun tells me. "Now, when I look at Khoo Kongsi, I feel really affected. We predicted this would happen, back in 2000, and it has, all over Georgetown."

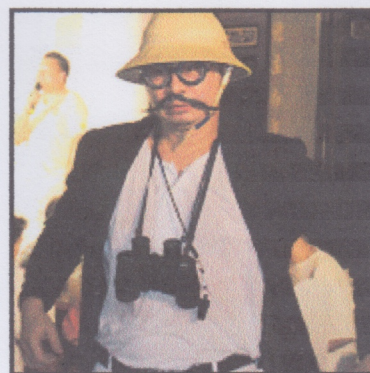
Conservation appears to be synonymous with tourism, here: it is obvious from the lamp-post and water metre of the Khoo Kongsi street, which I notice to be covered entirely with stickers blue and red saying *Admission, Adult and Child*. I learn from Janet that the Khoo Trust plans to turn these silent spaces into tourist lodgings: an opportunity for outsiders to experience Penang Heritage first-hand.

"It's very sad that people don't see it with the right perspective," Hun Meng says. "We need to see our culture and heritage with our own pride, first, before we go to the tourists. But they kick away the tenants to invite tourists in. It's a twisted way of dealing with it."

These sentiments birthed Mr. Lovelane, a concerned citizen who just happened to be named after Georgetown's most mischievous, red-lit street. "We chose that name because it is very catchy. Everyone in Penang knows it," Hun Meng says. "Now thinking about it, Lovelane is a good name. As a street it's not as glamorous as something like Jalan Bukit Bintang. People like it, but they are also shy about it. That's very much like how people treat the issue of heritage."

Fine young city kids

On Saturday afternoon I finally have the opportunity to talk to one of the



Mr Lovelane



The Wayang Bayang-audience



The Wayang Bayang-stage



The Bayang-bayang maker

actual *Anak-anak Kota*. We have just had lunch with the DiGi press and we are walking down Armenian street, watching the production crew fuss and the kids run around. The air is charged with expectancy, now, hours away from show-time, but Ch'ng Yu Jean has some free time. She is telling me: "It's difficult sometimes, working with a bunch of kids."

Yu Jean is now in Form Six, and she elaborates. "There were kids between ten and eighteen. But because of this diversity, you get more sensitive. Usually, when you're older, you have cliques: like if you're Chinese you stay with Chinese. But the younger kids were not so careful, so they interact freely, with everyone. I think us older ones had to learn from them."

"The whole thing was fun," Yu Jean would tell me later. "The thing that I got most out of it was actually to learn how to appreciate heritage. I mean, not just culture – but, you know, everything around me." A shift of attitudes, effectively: "Before, if you wanted to talk to me about heritage, I would have gone, like, anything lah, you know – a very usual response. But now I would want to learn more."

Later, at seven-twenty, I would I would be seated at a table in the Teochew Association on Chulia Street to watch State Executive Councillor for Tourism, Teng Chang Yeow take the podium. In his salutations, the YB would decide to deviate slightly from the script, adding: "I also want to thank the neighbours," – and he points up to a window where I see an elderly woman looking down – "Who are hanging their sarongs and clothes and are bringing us back to the past."

It is an immensely condescending statement, as if the households all around us were merely actors in some day-trip fantasy, and I would stop liking him immediately.

Frantic whistle blows interrupt dinner. "What are you doing?" Mr. Lovelane says. "The show is about to start!"

Dignitaries begin to follow this figure, helmeted and jacketed, his heavy ring of keys jingling, whistle blowing frantically, down Pitt Street. There are uniformed men directing traffic off the road, out of the crowd's way. We notice a stage and white sheet plugging the gap between two shop-houses that says *Wayang Bayang-bayang*.

The shadow play relates a curio from the nearby Yap Kongsu's temple history: a boy goes for a swim in the ocean, and emerges from the water possessed by a sea-demon. "Apa sudah jadi? Kenapa dengan aku ni?" he cries, but his effigy already shows us this calamity: the puppeteer flicks her wrist, and on its side the shadow on the screen acquires a bloated belly and a snout. Boys slaver offstage in effect.

The concerned mother now appeals to a Buddhist priest—a marionette complete with gesticulating fingers, clutching beads meditatively – who informs her, after a failed exorcism, that the powerful deity of the Yap temple is her only hope. She brings home the idol and a battle in the spirit world ensues. The crowd, sitting and standing, is as quiet as a music hall.

Then the whistle again, and in the middle of the Armenian-Pitt intersection two rows of young dancers are already waiting on stools, waiting to introduce us to a wealth of gastronomical practice: interpretative dance based on the gestures and actions of Georgetown's street hawkers.

And are these dancers sharp. The gestures of hand and back reminiscent of kopi-drinking, the noodle-making sweeps and arches: they seem effortless. The troupe includes prepubescent participants, but unlike young children, whose energies are often profuse but diffused, there is nothing uncontrolled about their performance at all.



The bayang-bayang



More Wayang Bayang-bayang audience



Gerak-gerak Borak-borak



The Chopstick dance sequence

I was a slow walker, and now I can't get a good view, behind everyone, so I circle the crowd, find a flatbed cart, and climb atop. There are people watching from storefronts and second-floor windows. More people join me, and I'm tiptoeing again. One last person gets on the cart and it quivers. I give up and get off. I don't really get a good view again before the dancers are done and off the road, too soon.

A last whistle blow and we are streaming into the Khoo Kongsi. Only tag-wearers get in, because there are too many people now, and Janet is worried about safety and ventilation. She's at the gate, directing lines, welcoming some and apologising to others. "Only the privileged can go in," says a father to his son.

"What does 'privileged' mean?" his son asks. It is not lost on me, this irony: that the Heritage Heboh Street Festival is afflicted by exclusivist tendencies – not by design, and Janet is visibly uncomfortable with the necessity – but for practical reasons; also, perhaps, because the nature of heritage and conservation, even in the paragon Penangite fashion, is officially coupled with outsiders to whom these forms of heritage do not belong: the Wa in KeKKWa was not so long ago a T.

But I'm reading too much into it. Though officials and corporate functionaries have tags, so do the participants' parents, the street hawkers, the small business owners of Inner Georgetown; the community whose way of life was under young scrutiny is, to all intents and purposes, here, watching their traditions perpetuated in a successor generation.

Yu Jean plays an old Chinaman alongside college student Natasha Khanum's mak cik; they both narrate, in *Boria* style, Penang's 1867 secret society war, and I see these children suddenly belligerent, re-enacting the Ghee Hin and Hai San conflict, where people of different colours banded together for all the wrong reasons: the stage turns red, the music crescendos –

And the moment is gone. The mirrorball begins to spin, the children exeunt, and Natasha begins to waltz: it is the Jazz Age, the bloodshed is over, and the gangsters now own Great World Park. Film footage of the golden age plays out to the right of the stage; there is a spotlight on the left, suddenly, illuminating Mr. Lovelane on a trishaw, pedalling forward Yudi, full-blown diva tonight.

It is profoundly moving.

Tracks of thought have converged on this moment. I think about the steamrolling economic engine of the PDC, with Bayan Baru and KOMTAR and its disregard for physical inheritances. I think about the Khoo Kongsi, and how its magnificent clan temple behind us has, among the depicted deities, a demon swallowing a man whole: a symbol, perhaps, for the Heritage Trail's disregard for Georgetown's soul, its people.

I think about Janet and her crew itself: sixty kids learning the traditions and practices of a community now under threat. I consider the fact that the night seems to end in an idealised version of history, and how this may be read as a retreat or concession, in the face of inexorable Progress, into sentimental longings for the past.

Too cynical.

If an introduction to the past must be spectacle, then so be it. We'll learn to colour in the nuances later. *Anak-anak Kota* is in no danger of halting, and sixty is not a small number. I would ask Yu Jean later whether she would consider being more active in heritage advocacy, and she is affirmative – but the question is moot, because she is already here.

Yudi's presence is pure nostalgia; indeed nostalgia is not a bad thing, if it introduces us to our own past: look at Hun Meng, still Lovelane, enthralled with



Music Bunyi-bunyan



The Music Bunyi-bunyan audience



Hoisting the host



Multimedia ferry

her performance. Finally, there's DiGi, with its corporate social responsibility, and they must have invested millions: the stage, space rental, printing costs, publicity, allowances, the amplifiers, the lights -

And now, there are fireworks.

~ ~ ~

Zedeck Siew has found his Lovelane.

Photos and captions by Pang Khee Teik.



Chup!



Harmony



Secret Society war



Yudi arrives



Janet celebrates with the kids



Fireworks

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