

► Stories by SONJA MUSTAFFA

TO be frank, it's no *Sesame Street*. This production does not have cuddly characters who talk or look remotely like Elmo or the Cookie Monster. There are no catchy tunes, no people who teach you the alphabet or how to count.

But even without the furry faces and goo-goo eyes, there is something very appealing and cute about the puppets of *Nezha*, Teater Muda (TM) production's latest play of an epic Chinese legend.

"I play the Dragon Child," said Ong Ning Jia, 12. The Dragon Child is the one who causes much conflict between the dragons of the sea and the humans of the land because Nezha, the peasant child who has been blessed with magical powers, taunts him. "I also play the fish and the drowning children."

Every year TM recruits about 20-25 children through auditions. This production, however, only showcases the talents of six, which explains why most of the young actors have multiple roles.

"The six were picked because they responded well to the puppetry module, and because they seemed the least affected by the glamour," said Janet Pillai, one of the directors of *Nezha*, and head facilitator of TM.

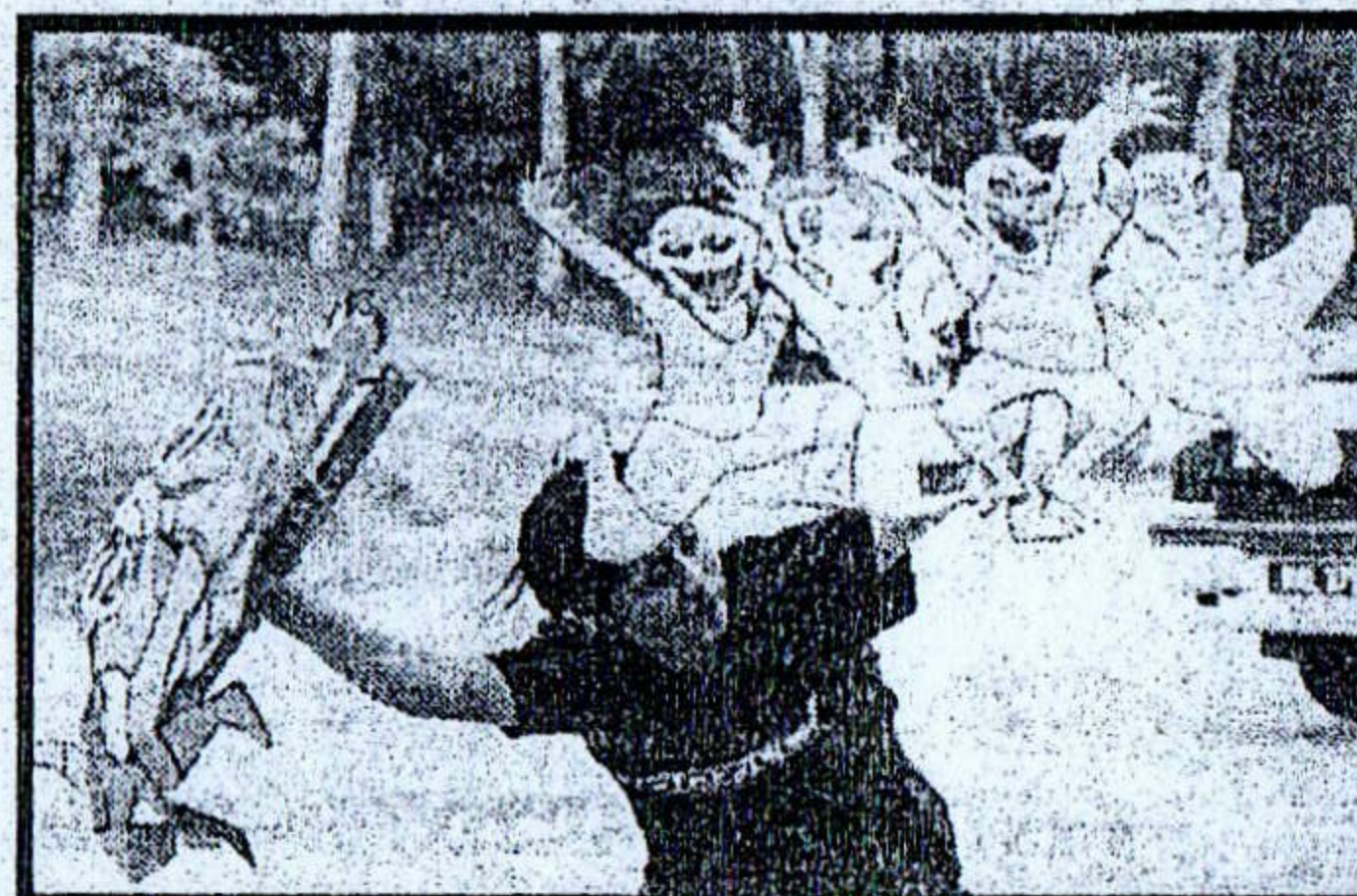
"We've seen it before. Once the children let the attention go to their heads, that's it, it stunts their growth. They get a kick out of doing the same things over and over again, and they don't expand."

The production was kept on a small scale because this is the first time TM has attempted puppetry. Every year, the TM modules change. In six months (the duration of the programme) the children learn anything from visual art, to set designing, to body movement. The expansion of each module depends on its facilitators.

This year TM has Liew Kungyu on board; Kungyu is a recognised talent in thespian circles, and someone Janet credits for having a great sense of drama. The co-director is the force behind the synthesis of *Nezha*'s three puppetry mediums — shadow, object and human.

Nezha is different in that it is not played on a stage. The hour-long production takes places in open spaces with only a white screen for the shadow play. There's very little script as well; in fact, it's the music that will weave this tale together. The puppets are made out of everyday discards like indus-

Playing in the streets



trial oil tins, plastic bottles, salvaged bathroom fittings and cardboard boxes.

"Kungyu was the one who made them and he used all these discards intentionally because he wanted to show that you don't need expensive or hi-tech equipment to do something like this."

"We would like the children to get ideas from the play. Even in the music department, we sought musicians who could play music with everyday objects," said Janet.

Entrance for the show is free but bear in mind you might have to stand or sit on the floor. It may also be initially difficult understanding the play.

"The tale of *Nezha* is just a storyline. The children developed the characters in this play themselves. I don't expect a lot from them because I know they are not professional actors," said Janet.

What do the children say? Are they nervous about acting or do they enjoy the experience? Ning Jia says that "with Teater Muda, I've had something to occupy my time. I don't bully the girls anymore, and sometimes, when I realise what I'm doing, I feel proud."

Before he joined Teater Muda, Ryan Lee Bhaskaran, 11, who plays Nezha, was a shy boy. He's not anymore; he's



KIDS PLAY: Janet Pillai (centre) gives a tip or two during rehearsals; far left, everyday objects turned into props.

beginning to live the dream of being in theatre.

"Janet's taught me a lot of things. Among them creative movement, rhythm, *wayang kulit* ... To get over stage fright, she taught me how to warm up. Every actor does it. I kinda sense that after this I'll be doing a lot more acting."

The "play" will take place in 13 different locations and has already begun its run. If you're interested in catching it, it will be staged at 8.30pm at the Sri Negeri flats in Sentul today; on May 29 at the Sri Trengganu flats in Sentul, on May 30 at the Sri Pahang flats in Bangsar, on May 31 at the Sri Kelantan flats in Sentul, on June 1 at the Sri Perak flats in Sentul, on June 2 at the PPR Jelatek flats in Ampang, on June 3 at the PPR Gombak flats in Gombak, on June 4 at the Sri Selangor flats in Kuala Lumpur, on June 5 at the Sri Sarawak flats in Kuala Lumpur and on June 6 at the Petronas Gallery in Suria KLCC at noon. For enquiries, call the Five Arts Centre at 03-715-4858.