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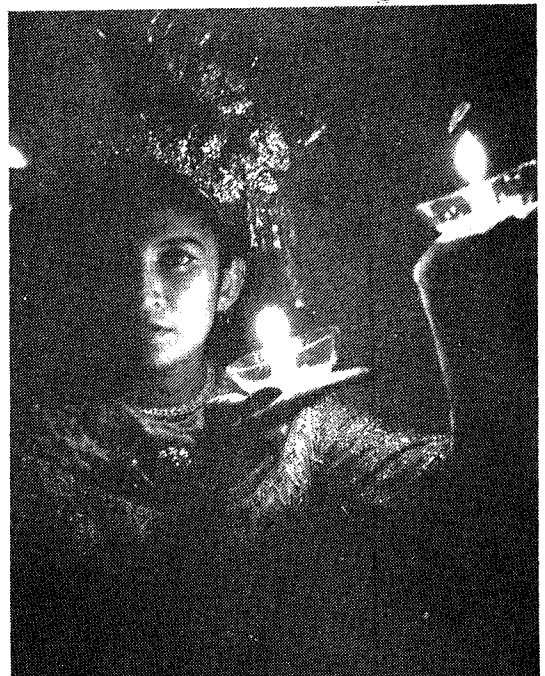
Solo

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

One weekend last March, travel agents, airline representatives and tourist promotion boards from the Southeast Asia-Pacific region gathered at the Singapore World Trade Center for their annual propaganda bash, the International Travel Fair. Participants in the three-day fete attempted to lure prospective tourists to their respective countries with a variety of enticements: posters, magazines, brochures, cultural artifacts, travel contests, hotel listings, national festival calendars, pocket souvenirs and promotional films. As a further temptation, participating tourist promotion boards offered live cultural shows from their respective countries: Hong Kong had the Sung Dynasty Village troupe, a circus-like extravaganza complete with acrobats, magicians and Mongolian wrestling; Macau, true to her cultural heritage, had a selection of Portugese dances and songs; Indonesia, India, Thailand and the Philippines each offered a variety of traditional folk and classical dances; Malaysia had Marion D'Cruz.

D'Cruz's solo performance was a first of sorts for Malaysia. She is a Malaysian of Indian ancestry. Her performance juxtaposed a selection of classical Malay dances with her own choreography, a melange of Western and Asian dance movements set to avant-garde, Asian-inspired Western compositions. This was quite a precedent for a country whose cultural troupes are normally composed of Malays, wearing Malay dress, singing Malay songs and dancing Malay dances.



Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is the performing arts.

In Malaysia, as in most plural societies, culture and politics are intimately related. The British Raj departed from Malaysia in 1957, leaving behind a century-long legacy of colonial rule and a salad bowl of culturally and economically separate communities: Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. No longer isolated from one another by the colonial presence, Malaysians attempted a peaceful coexistence.



With Independence, British colonial rule passed to the Malays, who, in the new Malaysian political cosmogony, were the bumiputras, the "sons of the soil," rightful heirs to Malaysia's bounty. The corollary of this view held that the other races were immigrants who had settled and prospered in Malaysia only through Malay beneficence and were thus citizens only through Malay consent. Malay sultans remained the titular state rulers in the new Malaysia, each serving in turn for a five-year term as the nation's king, the Yang di Pertuan Agung. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the nation's preeminent political party, was also the leading member of the ruling Alliance (later Barisan Nasional or National Front) coalition and its president, the country's Prime Minister. Malay language, traditions, customs and ideology became the basis for the national Malaysian culture. Islam, the official Malay religion, became the state religion. A star and crescent graced the nation's flag.

Though a Malay-based national culture had been defined, in the first decade after Independence few real official attempts were made to alter the cultural status quo, nor did the non-Malays seek integration with the majority culture. In 1969, however, inter-communal race riots provided the catalyst for a major change in government policy: no longer would the races be allowed to live in separate harmony, hereafter they would be forcibly welded into a "truly Malaysian society." In practice this meant quickened implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the primary means of communication and instruction, increased Malay participation in the Chinese-dominated economy and other measures designed to lessen the identification of race with economic function.

Although government policy aimed at integrating Malays, Chinese and Indians appears to be succeeding economically it has also raised fears of "detribalization" and cultural dissolution among the intensely chauvinistic Chinese and Indian communities.

The last few years has seen a resurgence of Chinese and Indian interest in their dance, music and art traditions. The Malacca branch of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, a member of the Barisan Nasional) now sponsors a highly successful Chinese dance troupe. In Kuala Lumpur, the Temple of Fine Arts, a classical Indian dance studio sponsored in part by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC, also a Barisan member) is barely a year old, yet has over 170 students (even ballet, the preserve of the urbanized Western elite, has gained in popularity. The venerable Federal Dance Academy in Kuala Lumpur has over 500 students). Few non-Malays care to study Malay dance. Fewer still develop sufficient proficiency to overcome Malay cultural chauvinism, which holds that only Malays can dance Malay dances with grace.

Marion D'Cruz is a rarity: not only has she learned Malay dances but she dances them well. She is one of a handful of Malaysian dancers that have sought out and learned directly from the fast-disappearing group of aging Malay court dance gurus. D'Cruz is also one of the few Malaysian dancer-choreographers attempting to integrate traditional Malay and other Asian dance forms with Western dance.

She has trained extensively in both Western and Asian dance milieux: six years of ballet has been augmented by study of the Bharatha Natyam Indian classical dance in Singapore, Javanese court dance at the Indonesian Dance Academy (ASTI) in Yogyakarta and Malay dance at the Universiti Sains Malaysia where she received the BA and MA degrees in performing arts. She has performed in numerous Malaysian dance productions and dance-dramas including Indraputna, the Ministry of Culture Dance Troupe production performed at the 9th Southeast Asia Games Cultural Festival. In 1980 D'Cruz spent a year in New York studying modern dance at the Martha Graham School and choreography at the Laban Institute. She also participated in two cross-cultural dance productions at La Mama, Ramayana and Tirai, as well as a collaborative effort with a Malaysian pianist, Margaret Tan, called East Meets West in Dance and Music.



D'Cruz's performance at the International Travel Fair, augmented by a dance on Singapore TV later that same weekend, capped a 6-city Peninsular tour sponsored in part by the Tourist Development Corporation of Malaysia and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the national language and literature development agency). Entitled, appropriately enough, Marion D'Cruz: Solo, the tour was produced by Mr. Krishan Jit (a director, writer, actor and American History professor at Universiti Malaya) and assisted































by two young theater enthusiasts, Carolyn Lau and Maureen Foo. Though intended primarily as a way of acquainting Malaysians with D'Cruz's meticulously controlled dance technique and her synthesis of Asian and Occidental dance, it was also good advertising: D'Cruz is planning to open her New Dance Theater studio this July.

Each of the tour's $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour performances was an exercise in stamina, poise and diction. The first half of the performance consisted of two dances, the Terinai Menghadap from the court of Perlis and the Timan Buring from the courts of Pahang and Trengganu. After a ten minute

intermission, D'Cruz then performed four new dances based on the works of modern, western composers: the Bacchanale and Amores of John Cage, Einstein on the Beach by Philip Glass and Temple Mystery from Alan Hovhaness's Suite for Piano, Opus 96. 4 of the performance's 5 costume changes were accomplished on stage, with the help of the assistants and a Burmese sarung modified for use as a performance and dress curtain. Each costume change was accompanied by a running monologue explaining technique, content, symbolism and the historical background of each dance. Such explanations, in Bahasa Malaysia and/or English depending on the audience, were sorely needed in a country where court dances are rarely performed and western avant-garde dance is virtually unknown.

I was asked to design the poster and program for the tour. In order to communicate the classical/contemporary nature of the performances as well as the synthetic nature of the new dances, we eventually decided on a composite image of D'Cruz, structured by a grid. This central image combined costumes from four of the dances and was achieved with line-conversion photography and illustration. Surrounding it were smaller photographic images of D'Cruz in silat (Malay martial art) attire, posed in various dance positions. Poster and program cover used the same image and were printed black on silver-gray with a white grid and title. The program interior used a similar process.

In addition to design, I accompanied the tour as one of three technical assistants, which gave me a chance to ask a few questions and view audience reaction. Audiences for the Solo tour were small, not uncommon for a venture of this sort (though the Harlem Globetrotters or the pop group Air Supply can pack the National Stadium, local performers, particularly of an experimental bent, usually get scant support), and reaction was mixed, ranging from effusive gushings to charges that D'Cruz's dances were too "academic." At a post-performance workshop in Johore Bahru,

	Marion D'Cruz	S	O	L	O	
	<i>Turish Dances</i> <i>Lama Old</i> <i>dan and</i> <i>Baru New</i>					
						
						
						
						
						
						
						
	Bandar 					
					Seremban 17th February Tutuh Sengul / Juma 8.30 malam	
					Melaka 17th Mac Gitarium MCA 8.30 malam	
					Pulau Pinang 4th Mac Dewan Sri Pinang 8.30 malam Kuala Mac Museum Universiti Sains Malaysia 8.30 prang Bandaraya Kota 21 8.30 malam	
					Ipoh 4th Mac K21 8.30 malam	
					Kuala Lumpur 4th Mac 4th Mac Pusat Pengajaran Universiti Malaya 8.30 malam	
					Jobor Baru 24th Mac Jobor Civil Service Club 8.30 malam	

members of the primarily Malay audience complained that her traditional dancing was "too sharp" and not sufficiently lemah-lembut (soft and gentle). She demured:

There is a continuing popular misconception, promoted by TV and stage performances, that Malay dance is easy because it is made up of basically soft hand movements. This was not true in the courts. I believe that there is an intensity and energy in traditional Malay dance, particularly in the hand movements. To achieve intensity while keeping the movements halus (refined) is extremely difficult. It eludes most dancers and they surrender to a soft, easy style that tends to look weak and helpless rather than soft and beautiful. Look at the old gurus and you can see that strength; even they complain that young dancers do not want to learn the old way. The dances that are most often seen on the stage and TV are usually this watered-down version of the real thing, perpetuating the distorted perception that Malay dance is easy. It's not.

Penerbit
Rekaman Poster dan Cenderamata
Penari Tarian
Pengurus Lampu
Pengurus Musik

Krisnan Jit
Bryan Bernard
Carolyn Lau
Mamoon Fou
Thangitanso
Bryan Bernard

Pada Penganjur Yang Disayangi
Grup Teater Eht
Cenderawasih, Pulau Pinang

Kelab Sungai Ujong, Seremban
Kumpulan Tarian M.C.A. Melaka
Restoran Kelab 21, Kontar, Pulau Pinang
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang
Perbadanan Kemajuan Pelancuran Malaysia (TDC)
Dewan Budaya Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka

Terima Kasih Kepada
Chin Sun Siew
New Straits Times
Malay Mail
The Star

Marion
D'Cruz

S O L O

Satu pertemuan dengan tarian istana Melayu tradisional dan penerokaan akan tarian baru.

Bahagian pertama persembahan ini akan menghidangkan tarian Teratai Mengadap dan tradisi istana Perlis dan Timang Baring, salah sebuah tarian yang terasluar dalam tradisi tarian gamelan yang berasal dari Pahang dan Trengganu courts.

Bahagian kedua akan mengemukakan tarian baru yang diimigasi dengan musik barat yang khusus dipengaruhi oleh kebudayaan musik timur.

An encounter with traditional Malay court dance and a discovery of new dance.

The first part of the performance will present the Teratai Mengadap from the Perlis court tradition and Timang Baring, one of the best known of the Joger Gamelan dances originating from the Pahang and Trengganu courts.

During the second part, new choreography accompanied by western music which is influenced by eastern music will be presented.

Terima Kasih Kepada

Chin Sun Siew
New Straits Times
Malay Mail
The Star

Bacchanale

Amores

Einstein On

Temple Mystery

Terima Kasih Kepada

Chin Sun Siew
New Straits Times
Malay Mail
The Star

Bacchanale

Amores

Einstein On

Temple Mystery

Suite for Piano, Opus 96 oleh Alan Hoshornes dimainkan oleh Margaret Tan.

Needless to say, D'Cruz's contentions did not go down particularly well with her accusers, but they were borne out a few weeks later in a letter from Tan Sri Datuk Mubin Sheppard, a well-known patron of the traditional Malay arts and an aficionado of Malay dance:

I was particularly impressed by your complete mastery of traditional hand and finger movements which now elude many younger dancers, even in Kelantan [a state on the northeast coast of Peninsular Malaysia well-known as a center for the traditional Malay arts].

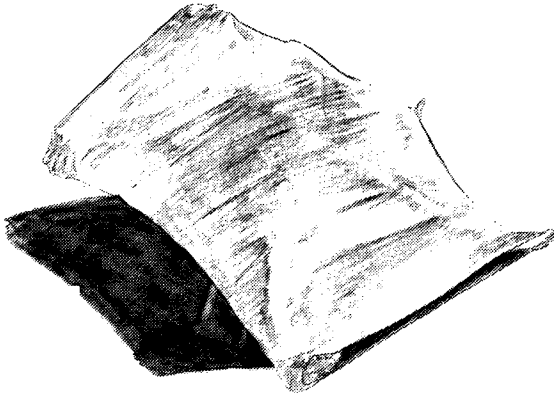
Later, D'Cruz enlightened me on the genesis of her work and the reasons for the tour:

Until 1978-79, my experience in dance, though long in number of years and fairly vast in the types of dance I had studied and performed, was still primarily the re-creation of dances that I had learned; that is to say, I studied from various gurus and was able to reproduce what I'd been taught, injecting very little of my own style. I learned traditional dance, mostly Malay forms, as well as some Bharata Natyam. The new choreography in which I was involved was the performance of new work by other choreographers. My own choreography was limited to collaborating on the creation of dances for two plays, namely, Bukan Bunuh Diri (written by Dinsman) and Tok Perak (written by Syed Alwi). By the end of 1979, however, the need to create my own work was strong. I needed to break away from the shadow of my gurus. Hence the trip to New York.



On my own as a solo performer I found the crucial direct and personal link with my dance. With no teachers around, I was able to make the forms, which I had studied and performed, uniquely mine. I developed a style. With my study of choreography came the beginnings of an east-west fusion. I think it began when I heard some piano music with strong Asian influences, or perhaps even earlier, as Asian influence in New York theater was, and is, very much alive. Martha Graham technique also draws on Asian sources. But more importantly, I believe this east-west fusion is an expression of my personal dance experience, my individuality and Malaysian society.

Traditional Malay dance performed today is a re-creation



of a style from the era of the 19th century courts, when the country was still mostly rural and undeveloped. These dances have little to do with contemporary Malaysian society, but they are still the primary sources for most Malaysian choreographers trying to create new dances. A few choreographers have tried to combine Malay dance with Indian and Chinese traditions, but in most cases the result is a mixture, not a fusion. The sources are still identifiable.

I am trying to produce choreography that is new and reflective of Malaysia but with less obvious components. This is not necessarily an equally balanced fusion of Malay, Chinese and Indian, but rather, new dance incorporating Malay movements and vocabulary from other existing traditions as well as new vocabulary based on a variety of sources. The West is an important source; it is, after all, an important influence on Malaysian society. I have found that Western choreographic techniques are especially applicable to new choreography as they are laid out and structured. The overt strength of modern dance combines well with the subtle inner strength of the East.

With the Solo tour I hoped to expose the Malaysian public to my new choreography and my interpretations of traditional Malay dance. I believe it is particularly important to show the public the intensity and energy that I feel are crucial in the correct performance of Malay dance. In my New Dance Theatre studio I will also teach traditional Malay dance, Western dance and new integrated choreography, including, perhaps, a movement class for children. I hope to experiment with a variety of source material such as wayang kulit. There are some very exciting possibilities with wayang technique and paraphernalia: screens, puppet shadows combined with human shadows, puppet-like dancing, etc. I also plan to continue my experimental work with masks, both traditional and modern. An example of this type of work was the Bacchanale piece where a traditional Javanese mask was used out of context and transformed from a traditional prop into an adversary, an alienating force.

I would also like to work with new musical forms. My next project is a collaborative effort with Louis Pragasm, a young Malaysian musician trying to fuse Asian and Western percussive music forms. His Asia Beat Percussion Ensemble uses instruments from all three Malaysian compo-

nent cultures along with Western instruments: gamelan [Javanese percussion orchestra], gendangs [double-headed Malay drums], tablas and muridangams [North and South Indian drums], bass and snare drums, Chinese drums, guitars, etc. Our performance will include solo and ensemble dance/music pieces, composed and choreographed for the occasion. This is untouched ground in Malaysia.

It is difficult to predict whether Marion D'Cruz's dance efforts will gain wide acceptance in Malaysia. Achieving official recognition as a cultural ambassador is one thing; performing successfully for the folks at home is quite another. Without converts, her's will be a rather lonely gospel. With time, however, Malaysians may come to believe in Marion D'Cruz as she believes in the tradition she is preserving and the new genre that she, and others like her, are struggling to create.

Sincerely,


Bryn Barnard



List of Illustrations

1. Photograph; Marion D'Cruz in Terinai Menghadap costume;
BEB
2. Drawing; Terinai Menghadap; charcoal on bristol board; BEB
3. Drawing; Timan Burung; charcoal on bristol board; BEB
4. Drawing; Bacchanale; charcoal on bristol board; BEB
5. Poster; Marion D'Cruz:Solo; BEB, printed by Dewan Bahasa
dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur
6. Program; Marion D'Cruz:Solo; BEB, printed by the Tourist
Development Corporation of Malaysia
7. Drawing; Amores; charcoal on bristol board; BEB
8. Drawing; Einstein on the Beach; charcoal on bristol board;
BEB
9. Drawing; Temple Mystery; charcoal on bristol board;
BEB

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