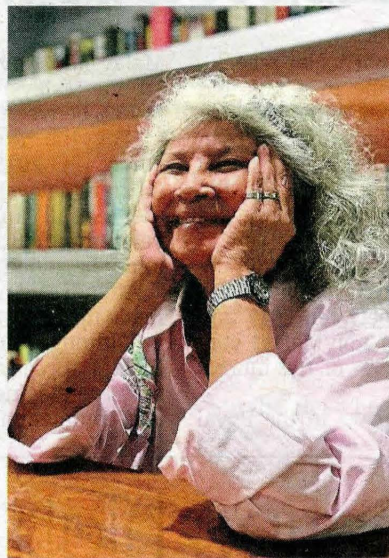


FLASHBACK #50

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KLPac, an arts hub for all



Showstopper: From a National Railway warehouse to the pulse of the arts scene and (top) Faridah, the first lady of Malaysian theatre, at the heart of it all.

Sixteen years ago, the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre was born and how it has changed the landscape of Malaysian theatre.

By **DINESH KUMAR MAGANATHAN**
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

It was with trepidation that I first walked into the sprawling grounds of the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac) in 2009.

With two pages of monologues clutched in my hands, I recall taking heavy steps as I approached the arts hub for my very first theatre audition.

But whatever fear and anxiety that was threatening to overcome me at that moment was immediately swept away by the 1.7 acres of lush greenery where the breathtaking arts centre building stood, next to a serene lake.

On that bright morning sun, I remember KLPac's glass panel windows gleaming, and it felt that I was in Australia or Europe and not in Sentul, KL.

But a very Malaysian sense of history could be found at KLPac's red brick walls and arched wooden doors. The building was once a railway warehouse constructed over a century ago.

The magic of visiting KLPac has never faded whenever I rolled up for assignments there.

With hundreds of arts and culture performances under its belt since its grand opening on May 9, 2005, the performing arts venue continues to inspire a certain creative spirit.

In fact, this was enough for this novice actor to calm his nerves and ace his audi-

tions back then.

The first lady of Malaysian theatre, Datuk Faridah Merican, also remembers vividly the first time she drove to Sentul Park (at YTL Corporation's Sentul West) with her husband Joe Hasham upon the invitation of landscape designer Ng Seksan.

"He took us around to see the different buildings that were 'on offer' and we wanted them all!" Faridah recalled.

"Until we were shown the clubhouse. It was oh so, so perfect – pillarless and double storey high!" she said.

At that time, just weeks after flash floods destroyed The Actors Studio at Plaza Putra, Kuala Lumpur (in 2003), Faridah did not know yet that she would be calling this abandoned building her second home.

But before it was turned into a performance arts space, the building had a rich history. It began as a woodcrafting workshop and sawmill in the 1800s. Then, it became part of Sentul Works, the region's most important railway depot and workshop in 1906.



In the 1940s, it was bombed during the tail end of WWII but was rebuilt in the mid 1940s. In the late 1960s, it was converted into a makeshift golf clubhouse but was abandoned in early 1990s.

And as serendipity would have it, the late Datin Paduka Seri Endang Mahmood, became an advocate for Faridah and Joe upon finding out about the potential arts venue at a fundraising event in August 2003.

"The then Prime Minister Pak Lah (Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and his late wife Kak Endon helped put in a good word to Tan Sri Francis Yeoh.

"I was told Pak Lah's words to Tan Sri were 'you've got to help Faridah and Joe'. Wow! That laid the foundation for Joe and me to write officially to Tan Sri who did not waste a moment the minute he came back from England.

"We were in Tan Sri's boardroom, armed with drawings and costings of what would be the ideal performing arts centre for The Actors Studio. There were three never to be forgotten words uttered by Tan Sri with a tear in his eye – 'go for it.' That was it. There were tears and hugs all round.

"Seventeen months later KLPac was born. Till today tears well in my eyes and my hair stands on end remembering those times," said Faridah.

KLPac welcomed the public on May 9, 2005 with *Shoku*, a show by Japanese contemporary dance company Batik and the theatre show *Siddharta*, *Above Full Moon*.

Since then, KLPac has hosted close to

3,000 productions and attracted more than a million visitors, with nearly 80,000 footfalls every year.

In the 16 years since KLPac was founded, Faridah said the memories collected have been plentiful.

"Oh dear, funny, sad and best of all they were there all the time!"

From developing a thick skin in dealing with government agencies, and now, dealing with the pandemic, Faridah said KLPac's journey as a performing arts venue had seen many highs and lows.

"Of course, nothing beats the last 20 months of having to endure the pandemic which has prevented us from doing all that we love best.

"Sad knowing that our staff are having to take pay cuts; they love us and would not let us down. Then there are those who do not expect a salary at all, until such time when Covid-19 is under control," Faridah said.

But the octogenarian stressed that throwing in the towel is not an option.

"Ever since the birth of The Actors Studio in 1989, Joe and I have never given up. We owe it to all around us who believe in us and believe in what we stand for. We live in hope – hope will drive us on – and a prayer or two," she said.

KLPac is expected to reopen to the public latest by early next month following the government's announcement that theatre and performing arts venues are allowed to have a fully vaccinated audience.

