Rhythm of diplomacy

Beyond a performance, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall dance troupe represents Malaysia as cultural ambassadors when showcasing the country's vibrant heritage on the global stage. >2&3

Graceful envoys: DBKL's dance troupe members rehearsing in front of a studio mirror, all dressed up in full traditional attire. — KAMARUL ARIFFIN/The Star

Dancers from the troupe preparing for a showcase, donning intricate costumes representing Malaysia's rich ethnic heritage.

Mohamad Taufik (front) leading the DBKL troupe dancers through a dynamic routine during full dress rehearsals, blending traditional forms into a seamless celebration of unity.

Cultural ambassadors on, off stage

DBKL dancers gear up for shows, both abroad and at home, as Visit Malaysia 2026 approaches

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THE sound of music echoes through the air as feet glide, twirl and stomp in unison.

Artis Budaya Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (ABDBKL) dancers are in full gear, rehearsing tirelessly, arms outstretched, headgear fluttering and their feet hitting the wooden panels in synchronised rhythm.

This is inside the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) studio at Pusat Kesenian in Jalan Rotan, Kampung Attap.

While the stage may be a riot of colours and tradition, rehearsals at the studio often begin in simple, everyday clothing like T-shirts, track pants, and socks, allowing the dancers to focus fully on precision, stamina and formations without the constraints of heavy costumes.

"You can't be worried about headgear or fabric when you are ironing out footwork," said choreographer Mohamad Taufik Bakar.

"We keep it practical in the early stages. It is about getting the basics right."

But as the performance date nears, the dancers switch gears, literally.

Full-dress rehearsals are held with complete traditional outfits, accessories and elaborate headgear to simulate the actual conditions on stage.

"That is when they adjust to the weight, heat and restrictions, and still look effortless," said Mohamad Taufik.

"Dancing in costume is a whole different challenge. It is the final layer of discipline," he said.

He claps to the tempo, correcting stances, fine-tuning gestures and urging sharper finishes.

"Again," he calls out, not for the first time that morning.

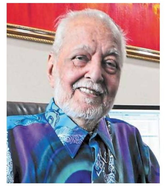
Dancers from the DBKL cultural troupe in traditional costumes, embodying the vibrant spirit of Malaysia's multicultural heritage.

Taking culture overseas

It is not just another day at practice.

Mohamad Taufik is preparing the dance troupe for an upcoming cultural tour to Vietnam, where dancers will perform in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi as part of the Malaysia Food and Beverage Expo, a soft diplomatic mission to promote the Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign and showcase the country's rich cultural heritage.

"These shows are important; they are about celebrating Malaysia overseas," said the choreographer who has been training the troupe for 20 years.



The DBKL dance troupe was the brainchild of the late Elyas.

"We want the performance to be perfect, so rehearsals start early in the morning and go on until night."

A total of 17 dancers are involved in this international assignment, with nine heading to Ho Chi Minh City and eight to Hanoi.

However, the rehearsals are being conducted as one big unit to ensure cohesion and consistency.

The group will be away for over a week, performing at key segments of the exposition to draw attention to Malaysia's diversity through dance, costume and traditional music.

"They are more than just performers, they are ambassadors of the city, of the country.

"When people see them on stage, they see Malaysia," Mohamad Taufik highlighted.

For him, the dance troupe's role extends far beyond choreography and stage presence; it is about diplomacy through culture.

He recalled a memorable cultural project in Thailand, done in collaboration with Tourism Malaysia, where the ABDBKL dancers performed and interacted with the public at a promotional booth.

"There was a booth set up outside the performance venue where people could try on traditional costumes like the ones worn by our dancers.

"We had *baju melayu, cheongsam, saree, sinjang,* you name it," said Mohamad Taufik.

"The visitors were so enthusiastic. They loved it. They took photos, asked questions.

"It wasn't just about entertainment, it became an educational and cultural exchange," he added.

Costume and craft

Mohamad Taufik said assignments abroad were carried out on a rotation basis to give every dancer an opportunity to travel.

"When one team goes overseas, another team stays back to handle domestic events. There must always be a group ready to perform at local functions, so we rotate.

"It also ensures everyone gets a fair chance to represent the country abroad," he stressed.

Whether performing for dignitaries at home or curious crowds abroad, Mohamad Taufik said the mission remained the same – to share Malaysia's cultural soul, one performance at a time.

Of course, no matter how talented a performer was, a good show was only as impressive as its costumes and the gear that went with it, he said.

DBKL has invested significantly in procuring traditional dance attires, including elaborate headgear and accessories, to ensure performances are both visually stunning and culturally accurate.

DBKL trainer Malinda Mohamed, 54, said costume procurement was done via open tender.

"We have a committee that researches the types of costumes required, then sources the fabrics and items accordingly.

"If it is a rare piece, someone may have to travel to Sarawak to buy it, but most of the time, the tailors we work with in Sarawak will get the materials for us," she said.

"One full set can cost up to RM4,000.

"Fabrics, like Terengganu *songket*, can go up to RM3,000 per metre. We are dealing with authentic and high-quality pieces."

To ensure cultural accuracy and respect, every detail from fabric to headgear is meticulously curated, Malinda said.

"This is culture, and we are dealing with historical facts. We need to get it right," she added.

To support this commitment to authenticity, DBKL has dedicated an entire library to its growing collection of traditional costumes.

Each outfit is paired with its corresponding headgear and accessories, carefully labelled and stored.

The space functions both as a cultural archive and a working wardrobe, preserving heritage while preparing performers for the world stage.

From street to stage

Come rain or shine, on polished hotel stages or open-air tarred roads, ABDBKL dancers are trained to perform anywhere, and they do it with grace.

Whether it is swaying to the rhythm of the *rebana* (Malay hand drum) under the scorching sun at the Sepang Formula One Grand Prix formerly or gliding across a soggy field at Dataran Merdeka, the show always goes on.

"They are professionals," said Mohamad Taufik.

"They have danced on everything from asphalt to marble floors. They adapt to the space, weather and crowd, and always give their best."

For the troupe, it is not just about the location, but the purpose to represent Malaysia's cultural soul wherever they are called to perform.

DBKL's cultural troupe has come a long way since its humble beginnings.

According to a DBKL spokesperson, the ensemble was first established in 1988 with just 16 dancers, five traditional musicians and a single choreographer.

It was the vision of Kuala Lumpur's third mayor, the late Tan Sri Elyas Omar who served from 1981 to 1992. He laid the foundation for what the troupe is today.

"Tan Sri Elyas saw the need for a dedicated dance group as a tourism tool to represent the city," said the spokesperson.

In 1998, the troupe was officially brought under the wing of DBKL's Culture, Arts and Sports Department with its members being absorbed as full-time staff of the local authority, serving under contract.

"They became one of our key tourism products, showcasing the uniqueness of Malaysian culture both locally and abroad," added the spokesperson.

While the troupe's roots are firmly grounded in traditional Malay dance, there is growing recognition of the need to reflect the full spectrum of Malaysia's multicultural identity, so it has expanded to include dances of other ethnic groups too.

With Kuala Lumpur emerging as a hub for major global events, including the 1998 Commonwealth Games, the Formula One Grand Prix and multiple national tourism campaigns, the troupe had to evolve.

"There was a need to adapt, to infuse some contemporary elements while still respecting traditional forms," said the spokesperson.

The ABDBKL troupe of 52 dancers, comprising 29 women and 23 men, perform at national and international events throughout the year.

Aged between 19 and 41, the dancers pour their heart and soul into every performance, showcasing Malaysia's rich cultural heritage on stages around the world.

With Visit Malaysia 2026 just around the corner, DBKL's cultural troupe is gearing up for what promises to be a packed and pivotal year, both at home and abroad.

Malinda (right) guiding dancers during rehearsal to ensure precision and cultural authenticity in every step.