



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2023

OSMAN ABDUL HAMID

An instrumental figure in the local Malay dance scene, **OSMAN ABDUL HAMID** (b. 1962) enjoys an illustrious four-decade career as artistic director and choreographer. He charts new frontiers while championing the preservation and promotion of the dance form. He established Teater Tari Era in 1996 as part of People's Association (PA) Talents, and co-founded Era Dance Theatre in 2009 where he is artistic director and choreographer.



Excelling as a Malay dancer under the guidance of pioneering figures such as Nongchik Ghani, Salleh Buang and Som Said, he has been with People's Association (PA) and Sriwana since 1979. He became resident choreographer in 1992 and has been overall artistic director for the PA Malay segment since 1998. He was also part of the Singapore National Dance Company in 1981, established by the then Ministry of Culture. As choreographer and artistic director, he has produced works such as the Singapore Arts Festival (2001) commission, 'Perjalanan – An Inner Odyssey'; 'Perahu – Breaking the Waves' as part of Esplanade's opening in 2002; and 'Zapin D' Muara' (2010), a three-day zapin festival; and 'Oh! Bangau' (2013) and Muara Festival (2011-Present), a Singapore Malay dance festival at Esplanade.

The visionary explores new ways through cross-genre/culture collaborations: 'Returning' (2015) by Goh Lay Kuan; as well as 'Angkor – The Untold Story' (2013) and 'Anjaneyam: Hanuman's Ramayana' (2017) by Apsaras Arts where he also played the role of Ravana.

Aside from taking part in national-level programmes such as National Day Parade, Chingay and Singapore International Festival of Arts, Osman has represented Singapore in overseas festivals in Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea.

An educator for more than three decades, Osman has played a pivotal role in shaping the dance group NUS Ilsa Tari since 1995. He has also contributed as advisor and external assessor for the National Arts Council, as a member of Asia Dance Committee Korea, and as an adjudicator for choreography competitions in the region.

A recipient of the Young Artist Award (1993), he has shown steadfast commitment to his craft and community for which he has earned the Singapore Youth Award (Service) (1993), Friend of MCCY (2014) and *Pingat Bakti Masyarakat* (Public Service Medal) (2018). In 2000, he was recognised as the Patron of Apsaras Arts by Apsaras Arts; and in 2020, he was given the *Natya Kala Bhushana* award by Bhaskar's Arts Academy, a title given to artists who have contributed significantly to dance.

'Wujud', 2015.

Photo courtesy of Era Dance Theatre Ltd



DANCE AS IDENTITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

BY DR NORAMIN FARID

Osman Abdul Hamid's journey to becoming one of the nation's most acclaimed dance choreographers is an unexpected one.

A star sportsman in secondary school, he excelled in sports, particularly basketball, soccer and hockey. His impression of Malay dance was that it was an unmanly activity and not a good fit for someone athletic like him. That was until he yielded to the persistent coaxing of friends who urged him to try Malay dance.

In 1977, he met his first dance teacher, Salleh Buang, whose approach was worlds apart from his initial expectation. Salleh advocated for an intensively physical regime, incorporating silat exercises. Osman was hooked – and the rest is history.

Today, Osman is justly feted for dedicating close to 50 years to artistic creation and service for his dance community. Committed to the development of Malay dance in Singapore, he now seeks opportunities for subsequent generations of choreographers.



'Wujud', 2016.

Photo courtesy of Era Dance Theatre Ltd

In 1978, when he was in Secondary Four, he made a foray into the Malay dance scene after he joined the People's Association Cultural Troupe (PACT) – and later on, National Dance Company in 1981. He learned dances ranging from modern to Chinese to Indian dance, and was tutored by the country's stellar dance choreographers such as Lee Shu Fen, Tony Lacer and the husband-and-wife partnership of K.P. and Santha Bhaskar.¹ With PACT, he had the opportunity to perform in Neila Sathyalingam's choreography that was part of Singapore Festival of Arts in 1984.

Osman was then exposed to other luminaries. He was introduced to Sriwana, Singapore's oldest Malay dance troupe, by the founder of the group, the late Nongchik Ghani.² Under Sriwana, he received guidance from Nongchik and Cultural Medallion recipient, Som Said, who taught him deeply about the genres and styles of Malay dance. They saw his potential as a leader, giving him opportunities to teach and choreograph.

However, in 1988, he hit a wall. Diagnosed with a rare auto-immune disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome which caused a rapid onset of muscle weakness, Osman was bedridden for a few months. He underwent plasma-exchange procedures and was out of action for about a year. Thankfully, this setback did not stop him from pursuing his passion; instead it strengthened his resolve. After critically reflecting on his life, he knew what he really wanted to achieve.³

His commitment paid off. For his various contributions as a community leader and a resident choreographer of the PA Malay Dance Group and Teater Tari Era, Osman was then conferred two awards, the Singapore Youth Award and the Young Artist Award, both in 1993.

He even drew on the aforementioned health crisis for his 2016 dance, 'Wujud – Bangkit dari Debu' (Existence – Rising from the Ashes), which was the follow-up to his 2015 work, 'Wujud – Badai Berdamai' (Existence – Calm Within the Storm). Augmented with live music and wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), the show was about his recovery and rebuilding his life, and celebrating dance as his saving grace.

"I started dancing as a hobby and it became a passion," he once said. "It then became a responsibility, and that widened to include shaping and developing awareness at the same time so that youths can appreciate a more directed approach. My experience is not only to dance and know dance, but also to weave in multifaceted elements of life into dance. Dance helps to shape our lives as Malays."⁴ It is this belief in the power of dance which renewed his sense of purpose.

As an emerging Malay dance choreographer in 2000, Osman was developing his aesthetics, rooted in silat and an astute awareness of the environment, and observant of quotidian bodily movements. His artistry is steeped in his curiosity as a mover. He questioned why movements he used to do while living in a kampung were not integrated within traditional dance. This marked the entry point where he explored



'Kacip Mas Dulang Permata', 2022.
Photo courtesy of Era Dance Theatre Ltd

everyday movements such as jumps, squats, runs and claps. While his exploration is viewed by purists as deviating from tradition, Osman emphasises that it is self-expression and not necessarily a depiction of authentic Malay dance.

For him, artistic creativity often comes from a place of genuine personal inquiry.⁵ Over time, Osman was regarded as a flagbearer of what came to be known as contemporary Malay dance. A mould-breaker, he challenged dancers and audiences alike. Aside from incorporating unconventional movements and costumes, his productions were multidisciplinary and multisensorial, which were quite novel in the 2000s.

Osman's penchant for experimentation has led him to recognise the vast richness of the Malay archipelago. Inspired by the training by dance maestro Tom Ibnur in the 1980s, Osman has delved into regional art forms and worked with Indonesian artists. Believing in "keeping the essence of the old while constantly creating something new," he has facilitated cross-cultural collaborations.

His 2001 work 'Perjalanan – an Inner Odyssey' integrated regional music and dance forms.⁶ With Tom Ibnur, he infused it with the vocals, music and dance movements of the Minangkabau randai, a folk theatre tradition that incorporated silat. He played with nuances, juxtaposing staccato moves with gentle, graceful ones, interspersed with cues of claps and voice.

For the second segment, Osman also worked with Bimo Wihatmo, a close acquaintance he made on a travel to Jogjakarta in 1998. The partnership proves to be long-term, due to a shared affinity for experimentation in sound and movement. Not surprisingly, the work was lauded for its refreshing marriage of multimedia and dance.⁷

In the new millennium, Osman devoted himself to elevating the Malay arts within the community he vowed to be in service to. This was evident in 'Gentarasa', a production first staged in 2002 by the People's Association Malay Activity Executive Committees Council (better known by its Malay acronym, PA MESRA). As artistic director, he galvanised about 150 talents from 15 community clubs which promoted Malay arts such as Malay dance, silat, dikir barat and literature. Two decades on, 'Gentarasa' is a thriving annual event celebrating the diversity of Malay arts in Singapore.⁸

Osman is at the forefront of cross-cultural exchanges as well. For 'Zheng He – Admiral of the Seven Seas', a concert by Singapore Chinese Orchestra as part of Singapore Arts Festival in 2005, he choreographed a royal wedding between Malacca's Sultan Mansur Shah and Ming princess Han Libao. This melding of Malay dance and Chinese orchestral music was a "highlight and illustrates the universal values of peace and political diplomacy."⁹

That year Xiamen Arts Center in China invited him to choreograph its



'The Mirror Within', 2014.
Photo courtesy of Era Dance Theatre Ltd

professional dancers for 'Amoy Amoy', a collaboration that also included PA's Fan Dong Kai, composer Iskandar Ismail, Tom Ibnur, and I Wayan Dia of Indonesia. In 2013 and 2017 respectively, Osman worked with Apsaras Arts in their productions, 'Angkor: An Untold Story' and 'Anjaneyam – Hanuman's Ramayana'. Osman played crucial roles in both international collaborations – as an architect in the former and the main antagonist Ravana in the latter, where he helped synthesise Indian and Javanese elements.

As an educator, he continues to teach in schools, with many students performing well in the Singapore Youth Festival. As resident choreographer of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Malay dance troupe, Ilsa Tari, from 1995 to 2023, he created iconic works that involved local and international artists, elevating the troupe's standard beyond that of a student's group.

At Ilsa Tari, he saw it as an opportunity to work with "raw bodies," moulding these dancers through his own unique pedagogy. He was also inspired by his students' openness to learning and that has in turn made an impact on his own work.¹⁰

Osman's forte, indeed, is in bringing people together. Exemplifying the Malay maxim of *bersatu kita teguh, bercerai kita roboh* (together we stand, divided we fall), he and Azrin Abdul Rahim co-founded the Malay dance company Era Dance Theatre (EDT) in 2009. He also set up Singapore Malay Dance Committee (SMDC) with peers who are leaders of their own Malay dance troupe.

Through Osman's facilitation, EDT and SMDC initiated platforms with pedagogy and talent regeneration in mind. These included Muara Dance Festival, a yearly festival showcasing the best of Malay dance from Singapore and the region, as well as Akar Subur, a platform to educate and present new works by aspiring choreographers.

Underlying Osman's art is a sense of responsibility in the practice and creation of Malay dance. While artists want to express their most intimate feelings and ideas, he believes they must also value the importance of the messages they wish to convey to the community.¹¹ Osman's dutiful endeavours are wonderful reminders of the long-lasting impact he has had on the community of Malay dancers.

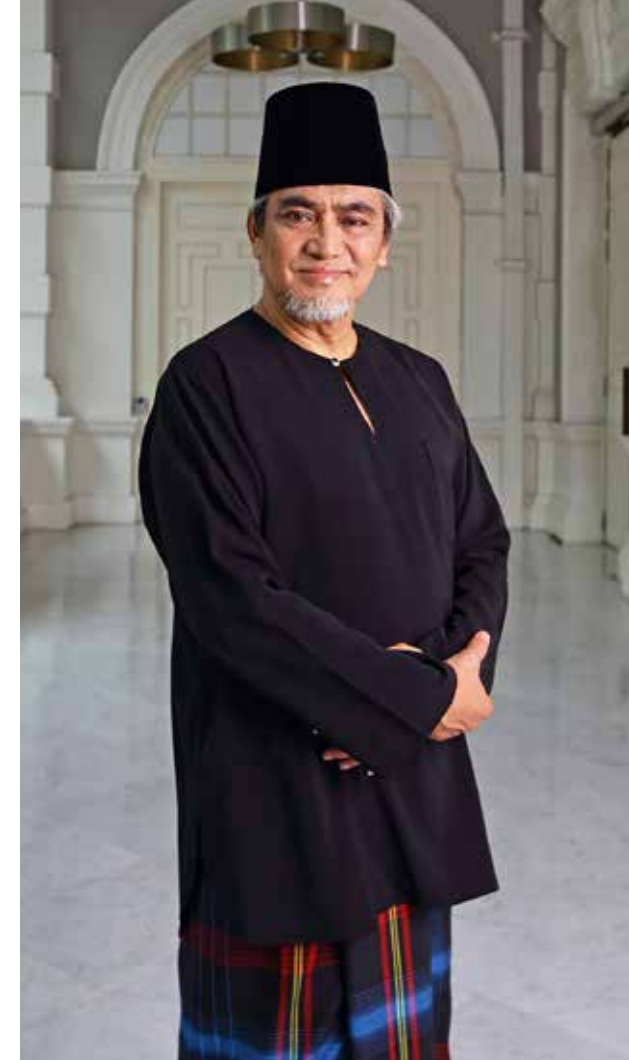
Better known by his stage name, Souttari Amin Farid, **Dr Noramin Farid** trained in Malay dance with Perkumpulan Seni. He is a choreographer, arts educator and researcher.



'Wujud', 2016.

Photo courtesy of Era Dance Theatre Ltd

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WORDS OF APPRECIATION

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