

## Dance Education: A Pedagogy for Empowerment

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### Abstract

This paper investigates pedagogical approaches to teaching dance, beyond the traditional delivery of codified dance techniques. The paper reports on the system of dance education being employed at the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage Malaysia, which has produced graduates of exceptional ability whose success is benchmarked against national and international awards and scholarships. For the most part, students in the program come from underprivileged and disenfranchised backgrounds. Framed by two influential pedagogical theories, Paolo Friere's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and Howard Gardner's theory of "multiple intelligences," the following approach and case studies of two students who have benefitted from it reveal the transformative and empowering potential of dance education.

**Keywords:** dance education; dance pedagogy; Malaysian dance; pedagogy of the oppressed; multiple intelligences; multi-cultural dance; dance theatre

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## Introduction

The pedagogy for teaching performing arts in Malaysia (and perhaps globally) has most often been thought of as the methodology for delivering a certain body of knowledge in the arts—theatre, dance, music, etc.—at specific levels. This is normally implemented through several channels, including school curriculum, specific organizations or societies, independent private schools, and dedicated professional academies, up to those conferring the highest professional or tertiary qualifications.

This paper presents a pedagogical concept for dance education from a very particular point of view, though it may be applied more broadly to common practices of career educators and academics working in the arts and elsewhere. The approach draws from two important theories of education in general. The first is Paolo Freire’s 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the second is Howard Gardner’s work on “multiple intelligences,” introduced in 1983. Freire challenged traditional approaches to education (which he called “banking,” while referring to the standard teacher-student relationship as one between colonizer and colonized). He describes his banking concept of education as

an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (2000: 72)

Freire offered an alternative vision in which the student acts as a co-creator of knowledge, and knowledge arises out of dialogue in “[t]he encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.” He argued that “dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who

deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them” (2000: 88).

While it is often suggested that children who are denied arts education are in some way oppressed, disenfranchised, or victimized, this does not paint an entirely accurate picture of the situation the world over. This paper postulates that, in the Malaysian context (which I hope will resonate on a global platform) and in the personal approach to dance education that I am interested in, the truth lies somewhere in between, or, rather, along a continuum of strategies, models, and people.

This paper recognizes and celebrates that dance (and all arts) education at a professional and tertiary level aims for artistic excellence, ideally leading to professional careers, but posits that it could play a more holistic and significant role. I will refer to this as the “Pedagogy for Empowerment” and hypothesize that, beyond delivering technique and form, performance quality, musicality and so on, dance education (and arts education more generally) is about empowering the human being. This is especially true when applied to students who might not necessarily acquire self-worth in the course of regular schooling, where, too often, insufficient value is placed on artistic intelligence, while the focus remains on, mathematical, scientific, and linguistic intelligence. This paper suggests that dance/arts education steer the child toward empowerment and be a tool for transformation, the highest level of attainment—and the ultimate height of human development in the creative space and beyond.

## 1. Education at ASWARA

Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK) or the National Arts Academy was established in 1994, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.<sup>2</sup> This was Malaysia's first institution of higher learning to focus on providing full-time training, initially a four-year program in the arts, leading to a Diploma in Dance, Theatre, Music, and/or Creative Writing.<sup>3</sup> This blueprint for arts education in Malaysia at the tertiary level was initiated through the efforts of the Ministry of Culture, with contributions from academics, artists, and practitioners, both local and international, who formulated the syllabus of study. Mohd Anis Md Nor and the late Krishen Jit, both of the University of Malaya, Zakaria Ariffin, and Hanafie Imam were appointed on a part-time basis to the helm of the departments of Dance, Theatre, Creative Writing and Music.<sup>4</sup> The programs at the institution are intended to reflect its role as custodian of national cultural heritage and identity, to produce skilled practitioners, and to develop creative and knowledgeable artists.

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<sup>2</sup> The Ministry has undergone several reincarnations: Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, then Unity, Culture and Arts, and currently Information, Communications and Culture, while the Ministry of Tourism is a separate entity. The tuition fees for each program are only approximately RM 6,000.00, making it the lowest-priced college of higher learning for the arts. The government provides funding of up to RM 3 million a year for salaries, and utilities.

<sup>3</sup> The Faculties are constantly being restructured. Cinematography, which was launched in 2002, was changed to Film, Television and Video, and is now known as Film and Video, and new Faculties of Animation, and Fine Arts were introduced in 2008 and Management in 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Mohd Anis, who possesses a doctorate from the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, is Malaysia's leading dance scholar. The late Krishen Jit was an icon in the industry, known throughout the region as an educator, critic, founder of the collective Five Arts Centre, and director with a wealth of knowledge of theatrical forms. Zakaria Ariffin is a prolific playwright, winner of the prestigious SEA (South East Asia) Write Award 2002 for literary achievement, and theatre director and actor, while Hanafie Imam is a leading jazz musician and an academic with a Masters degree from Berklee College of Music, in the U.S. In 1998, Mohd Anis left ASK, initiated the post-graduate program at University of Malaya, and launched Malaysia's first undergraduate degree program in dance at the end of 2005. Hanafie Imam moved on to various institutions of higher learning, including serving as Head of Music at University Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu. Krishen Jit entered one of the most prolific periods of theatre directing in his life, commuting between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore with regularity, until his passing in 2005 at the age of 65.

In 1999, under new direction, a modular system was implemented, and the Diploma course was shortened to three years. The dance program was restructured into three major modules of study, namely traditional arts, contemporary arts and choreography, emphasizing multiculturalism and plurality, with a module of theory and history. Following the parliament's approval of Act 653 in 2006, the name of the institution was changed to Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage), known by its acronym ASWARA. The Bachelors program commenced in January 2008.

The Faculty of Dance of ASWARA mapped distinct goals for each of its programs. Freire wrote that “[t]he starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (2000: 95). What is unique at ASWARA is that major traditional dances of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities together, in addition to ballet and contemporary dance, are all compulsory courses for dance majors and are taught for the entire duration of the program. Some Malay folk forms as well as basic dances of the indigenous communities of Malaysia are taught for just one semester each. It is a very ambitious program. The Diploma in Dance is geared toward training the performer, enabling the body and mind of the dancer to be responsive to the multiple genres of dance in Malaysia, while maintaining a global perspective. The Bachelor of Dance program, which is also three years long, allows the undergraduate to achieve excellence in one major area of dance technique or choreography, with a great emphasis on theory and history, including research and writing. Visiting artists, both local and international, workshops, and exchange programs form an integral component of the syllabus, which enables greater stimulation and interaction between faculty and students.

The diploma and degree courses are approved by the National Accreditation Board<sup>5</sup> and recognized by the Civil Services Department, which is responsible for all employment by government, though the schemes into which graduates can be absorbed are still limited and not always commensurate with qualifications and experience.

The Faculty of Dance has taken great effort in excavating and reviving dances of the indigenous communities of Malaysia that were and still are, despite valiant attempts, slowly fading into oblivion. The process involved the identifying of traditional dances and dance masters, who primarily practiced their art in the villages. These masters have been invited to conduct master classes at the institution. During their residencies, their work is recorded and documented. In addition to this strategy, there is a compulsory industrial training of practicum or research project, depending on the interest of the individual student, which runs four weeks for the Diploma and three months for the Bachelor program. Undergraduates are encouraged to immerse themselves in local communities and to understand the significance of dance within a particular society. Although these research projects take place at a fairly introductory level, as research methodologies have not yet been mastered by the young students, some of the results have been encouraging. Among the successful research projects were Hazlami Harun's work on *zapin* dances from Kelantan. Al Jabar Laura also investigated that form's development in the Tidong community in Tawau, Sabah. Also of note was Zamzuriyah Zahari's research into *Tari Inai* from Kelantan. Norsafini Jafar was able to reconstruct many of the *Joget Gamelan* dances with teachers Zaharah Hamid and Wan Salmah Sulaiman, both dancers with SUKTRA<sup>6</sup> in Terengganu, and the repertoire has been

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<sup>5</sup>Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN) works with the Ministry of Education to approve courses that are offered by private and public institutions of higher learning. The basic guidelines are referred to as the Standard Minimum Criteria, which governs the qualifications of the faculty, facilities, entry requirements, and implementation and requirements of credits hours and so on. In 2006, this body is known as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA).

<sup>6</sup>This is the famed group from the 1960s that received royal patronage and mastered the repertoire of the *joget gamelan* for palace presentations, including the historic 1969 presentation at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

built up to 11 dances from only two in the past. Dancer-scholar Zamin Haroon, also known as Chandrabhanu, who resides in Australia, was invited to ASWARA to conduct master classes in the classical court dance *Terinai* for several weeks over a three-year period. While here, he organized the visit of members of the arts group known as Terseri from the state of Perlis, well-known in this form, in order to make DVD and audio recordings. This remains some of the best documentation of the dance. All of these dances have now been included in the dance syllabus of ASWARA and are performed whenever possible, keeping them alive while attempting to reach out to new audiences. Thus, one of the areas of emphasis of education is a comprehensive and contextual learning of dance forms that are facing extinction.

In addition to these courses, from the inception of the institution, traditional Malay theatre *makyung*,<sup>7</sup> *bangsawan*<sup>8</sup> and the shadow play *wayang kulit* have been compulsory core courses for all undergraduates at ASWARA. These traditional theatre forms incorporate music, dance, and acting. Multi-disciplinary training in Malaysia as in Asian theatre began centuries ago!

## 2. Admissions at ASWARA

At all Malaysian universities that offer tertiary studies in the arts (including dance), the audition process, if there is one, is completely different from what one may encounter for acceptance into the world's best conservatories, such as School of the American Ballet, Royal Ballet School, Beijing Dance Academy, Vaganova Academy, or the Paris Opera Ballet. At these institutions, the audition itself is often a space for heightened drama. Because it makes great theatre, the process has been food for the imagination behind such films as

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<sup>7</sup> Variously spelled "Ma' Yang," "Mak Yong," "Ma'yong," or "Ma' Yong."

<sup>8</sup> Also known as Malay Opera, incorporating acting, singing, and dancing. "The extra-turn" is a song and/or dance interlude that occurs when the curtain is lowered for a scene change. It generally has no relevance to the development of the plot of the play.

*Fame, Flashdance, and Centrestage*, wherein masses of lithe, flexible bodies line corridors in pink tights or leotards, practicing multiple *pirouettes* and *battus* at national or international competitions. This could not be farther from the ASWARA experience.

As head of the selection panel, I often quip that as long as there are no visible disabilities, we are willing to accept a candidate. Most students who come to ASWARA arrive at the age of 17 or 18 with minimal experience in dance. In most countries, this would be considered relatively late. Although there is an audition process, it is more of a formality than a stringent review. The program currently attracts those whose previous experience is limited to participating in their schools' co-curriculum or cultural societies. Generally, the applicants possess only a few passes or credits in the high school certificate examination and, more often than not, have failed subjects such as mathematics, science, and English language. These candidates often have literally nowhere to go, given their poor academic qualifications and histories of having been classified as "failures" within the examination system or culture. Their grades would not enable them to pursue higher education in any of Malaysia's public universities or colleges, despite policies in Malaysia that privilege one ethnicity before all others.<sup>9</sup> Private higher education is usually not an option for these students, as parent/household incomes are normally less than RM 1,000.00 per month. In a typical account from one of ASWARA's recent success stories, Raziman Sarbini, who comes from a town called Limbang, in Sarawak on the island of Borneo, explains that his options were limited.

I am the youngest in a family of eight, and none of my older siblings continued their education post secondary school. Although, my results were poor, I chose to enter 6<sup>th</sup> form because there were no real options after my high school certificate. I actually

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<sup>9</sup> New Economic Policy was implemented in 1970 after the infamous racial riots of 1969. For further information regarding its specific goals or outlines, visit <http://www.epu.gov.my/en/dasarekonomibaru>; *see also*, Article 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

did not know what I wanted to do with my life since I was academically weak, with poor reading and writing skills. I was without a clue and there was no proper career guidance at school. No one spoke about dreams or aspirations or potential. My parents are farmers who tapped rubber with a monthly income of about RM 800.00. I thought perhaps that I might become a cook (now they are called chefs) as I enjoyed cooking a lot and worked part time in the school cafeteria or just helped where and when I could to earn extra money. I also excelled in athletics and thus enjoyed physical activity. In my 3<sup>rd</sup> form, I participated in aerobics competitions for fun, and it opened a new horizon for me. I struggled through my year in 6<sup>th</sup> form, finding the academic subjects too challenging, and really began to feel very lost—like a sinking ship. At that time, a high school friend of mine, Siti Fatin Nadzirah Pedi, who was very active in the high school cultural club, had applied, was accepted, and had begun her studies in ASWARA for a year, and thus I thought I could apply, too. I heard that the college was good, but I had no idea about the curriculum. I assumed that there would be a lot of traditional dances. I had to travel to the capital city, which was very far away (about 1,000 kilometres). My journey was filled with many incidents, such as losing my wallet, and when I arrived at the audition, I was tense and fraught. I had to perform a few dances to music that I had never heard and did not know at all. I just improvised to the music, and it was a difficult experience, but I did it with all my passion and energy. I did not think that I would be accepted. But I was, and I joined ASWARA in 2010. My only idea for my future was to work as a cultural dancer in one of the government agencies once I completed my Diploma. This was all I knew. (Personal communication, Dec. 30, 2014)

Later in this paper, I document the journey of this dancer, who provides just one example of the kind of personal transformation the study of dance can inspire.

### 3. Pedagogy of Empowerment

All of the factors or strategies discussed below together make up what this paper posits as the “pedagogy of empowerment” and exemplify what it entails. Everything begins with teachers and the teaching. The “best practices”<sup>10</sup> in any learning institution or college involve retaining the **best teachers** to deliver the required knowledge to graduate, at best, the superlative graduate who excels beyond all others and, at the very least, to garner an acceptable minimum standard performance, so that even the “weakest” graduate has something to offer and is employable.

Judith Lynne Hanna lists the five core ideals for teacher competency in dance as follows:

1. Show commitment to students and their learning;
2. Know the subject of dance in all its aspects and how to teach it to students;
3. Manage and monitor student learning;
4. Think systematically about teaching and assessment practices;
5. Participate in learning communities. (1999: 760-777)

As the head of the Faculty of Dance at ASWARA, I have held onto these principles fiercely. Empowerment depends on these fundamentals, and the faculty is very privileged in that it is able to employ 10 full-time lecturers as well as 10 part-time lecturers on an annual basis to cater to approximately 80 dance majors. This is a luxury that is unique in a world where budgets in arts education continue to be slashed. The specialists are employed in every field possible, including classical and folk dance of each ethnicity, ballet, contemporary dance, choreography, and theory. Four full-time lecturers are age 55 and older, and four are under 30 years of age, with two falling somewhere in between. This provides us with a great mixture of experience and youth. There are complexities involved in this specific

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<sup>10</sup> See Bardach, E. (2000). *A practical guide for policy analysis: the eightfold path to more effective problem solving*.

ecosystem, in that it could allow the hierarchy of age and teacher-student relationships, or the Asian sense of deep filial piety, to prevail, thus preventing healthy exchanges of ideas from taking place, but this has gradually been overcome. It is important that everyone has a voice. The faculty, which is carefully screened, brings together committed educators who are willing to spend time to develop relationships with and invest their time in the students.

For the dance majors, concentrated learning and **contact hours** are essential. Dance is not knowledge that you can receive from a textbook. Rather, it is incremental, developmental, and progressive. Therefore, the student learning time is extensive—generally up to six hours of practical classes per day, five days a week, 14 weeks per semester, two semesters per year. Since dance (the arts) is not something from which we can take extended breaks, especially if introduced to it at a fairly late age, a portion of the semester break is dedicated to rehearsals or special projects that will keep the students in shape and develop different skills, including management and marketing the arts or speaking, writing, or presenting on them. Learning beyond the classroom and being exposed to a variety of styles or choreographic approaches is essential, especially for the ultra-enthusiastic students.

Many extra and unrecorded hours are spent giving feedback promptly so that the dancers may retain and process the information efficiently, and not develop bad habits. The process of feedback includes that provided by lecturers from all members of faculty, even those who do not teach the specific class or technique, but have experience and understanding, serving as in-house external assessors. In this way, the student dancer is viewed through fresh lenses at least once a semester, in the studio situation. This has to be constant and requires a serious commitment and stamina, especially when the cohort is big.

Most of our classes have about 15-25 students in them. As described by several lecturers, at this point in arts education in Malaysia, and most certainly at the Faculty of Dance, we cannot “drop the ball.” We therefore spend a great amount of man hours counselling, nurturing, cajoling, threatening, and rewarding the students. The environment that we have fostered at the Faculty is one of close interaction, camaraderie, and familial feelings, which is especially meaningful to students who come from smaller towns or villages across the country.

One of the focal points of pedagogy for empowerment or transformation involves **inspiration and motivation**. This sounds simple enough but cannot be over-emphasized. The pedagogy is designed to realize potential, to open minds to the vastness of the world of the arts, to discover the magic, to raise the bar, to set high standards, and to teach the power of big dreams. The faculty of **arts educators** is generally a student’s first point of contact with the dance profession. We must therefore strive to invoke feelings of awe or inspiration—by our achievements, creativity, and the many forms of recognition we receive from our local and global fraternity, so as to be great role models for young dancers. Inspirational storytelling, teaching good classes, being enthusiastic and passionate about movement, art, music and life, challenging the students and, having a sense of humor, all make a world of difference in a classroom or studio setting. This is a daily ritual.

This pedagogy stresses the value of careful repetition and the necessity to develop the required stamina—not just in students, but also in faculty. Passions come and go, the flame may burn bright, but it may not last very long. This approach thus places emphasis on a dogged, robotic, machine-like efficiency of practice. Nothing motivates like actually seeing the results—being able to do what you could not before. This pedagogy of empowerment stresses the importance of understanding that it is not about being another Kazuo Ohno,

Sylvie Guillem, or Mikhail Baryshnikov; while it is imperative to communicate high expectations, ultimately learning dance and performing in the arts (and in life) is about being the best that each one of us can be, striving every day to be better than the day before—that is, to be better than you, yourself, have been. This is an extremely difficult challenge, as it is human nature to compare, especially with dance being so visual. It wants to leave us either, arrogant when we are better or frustrated when we fall short.<sup>11</sup> Dance and performing arts have been riddled with stories of how frustration pushes artists over the edge, as egos can be so fragile. The nightmare stories of abuse, drugs, starvation, and other forms of deprivation are rampant. This is well documented in prima ballerina Gelsey Kirkland’s book *Dancing on my Grave*<sup>12</sup> and displayed in the fictional movie *Black Swan*.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is imperative to make the students understand the importance of healthy competition, and, at the same time, that acceptance and balance is critical. It requires infinite wisdom and maturity to know the difference between the things that are within our power to change and those we have to live with. This pedagogy of empowerment is not interested in creating clones but in facilitating the blossoming of each arts practitioner into the best model of themselves. For students who believe in higher powers, through religion, spirituality, or divinity, then it is about being what they are meant or destined to be. This process and system of education insists on understanding the multiplicity of talents that are present in each undergraduate. The emphasis of the pedagogy of empowerment is on asking all students to challenge themselves; for each to ask the question “Why can’t I?” Or, to put it more positively and paraphrasing from Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign in the USA, “Yes, I can!”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See the poem “Desiderata” by Max Ehrmann.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkland, Gelsey G. (1987). *Dancing on my Grave*. New York: Jove.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0947798/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

Linked to the motivation described above, is the task of creating a healthy atmosphere of competition, challenge, benchmarking, and **exposure**. It is imperative that, at whatever level the arts are being taught, teachers communicate high expectations while broadening their students' horizons and expanding their world views. It may come as a surprise, but many of those who choose to come to train in professional schools in Malaysia possess very limited knowledge and scant understanding of the world of performing arts; often even those who make their living working in these environments have had limited exposure.

Since, the specialization and unique strength of ASWARA lies in its multicultural syllabus, our dancers are encouraged to benchmark against the best in each field. In order to participate in Malay folk dance competitions, to complete the highest levels of *bharatanatyam*, which is the *arangetram*, or participate in the national ballet competition, which is the only one available in the country, our undergraduates are taught to challenge themselves against the best in the various genres—that is, against those who only practice in those genres. With this approach, ASWARA has had some astounding results, with champions in the National Chinese Dance Competition in 2006, where the group performed Zhou Gui Xin's *Journey*, based on the technique of the Xinjiang tribe of China, and the students comprised the only 12 non-Chinese dancers in an event with about 1,000 performers. The faculty has also presented five graduates in the *arangetram*, all of whom were of non-Indian ethnicity. This constant benchmarking is essential to creating a healthy learning environment.

Beside the physical, feeding the imagination is vital and extends beyond the studio at ASWARA. The faculty organizes talks by successful graduates and established artists, who are often called on to give talks and share their experiences with the students who are just beginning their journey. Trips to the theatre on a regular basis form an integral aspect of learning, working out special discounted rates where possible, so that students are

able to watch all of the major shows in town. This requires much negotiation with theatre producers, as ticket prices are sometimes too exorbitant, and it becomes unaffordable to go to performances two or three times a month. The logistics seem mundane, but this needs to be mentioned, as it is really an indication of the constant effort that is needed to facilitate these programs. Such activities are especially important because most students come from towns where there were no opportunities to have witnessed performances live. Some places even lack Internet access. The benefits of watching live performances are unimaginable; there is much to be learned from even the less successful productions, and post-performance dialogue is always encouraged, either formally or otherwise. Since the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, technology has allowed the world to enter the classroom through the Internet. Today, free WiFi should be made available to all and assignments may include compulsory viewing of iconic productions of the world's greatest artists, accessed without incurring any expense, via Vimeo, YouTube, and social media sites.

A key element in empowering youth in dance perhaps particularly relevant to Asia is **changing the colonized mindsets** of those who come into dance to work with students to persuade them that they and their dance forms are not inferior to their western counterparts. The aesthetics and athleticism that are embodied in ballet and contemporary dance forms have much more bravura and thus appear much more difficult and impressive than local Malaysian arts. Consciously or otherwise, these become the only legitimate yardsticks or benchmarks of excellence. It is true that several Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Philippine ballet or contemporary dancers have excelled on the world stage—artists like Miyako Yoshida, Li Cunxin, Darshan Singh Bhuller, Tetsuya Kumikawa, and Akram Khan. Teachers and practitioners need to understand, communicate, and champion the fact that, because dance is universal, we cannot be colonized in our art. It is vital that recognition is given to those who excel in local forms.

The situation is such that, generally, non-western or Asian forms often do not possess the movement vocabulary of spectacle or grandeur that causes the hearts of the audience to leap up into the mouths, leaving them gasping and breathless. The obvious exceptions would be classical or highly stylized, intricate or acrobatic Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, or Thai forms, to mention a few. The Internet and the economics of the arts have served to glamorize, and promote popular art forms, such as hip hop and others, to a degree that those in education or local arts practitioners sometimes feel like they are swimming upstream. The emergence of television reality programs such as SYTYCD and others have packaged dance into these very tight neat 1.5-2 minute sequence-capsules designed to impress judges or viewers who are required to vote for their favorites. Dance is colonized by this fast-food, instant-gratification mindset. The pedagogy of empowerment stresses the need for art students/dancers to be taught the value of competence in these dance languages, and knowledge of these traditional forms. It is precisely the uniqueness that gives agency and empowers the dancer when on a global stage or in an international collaborative platform or laboratory. It most definitely contributes to building of self-esteem, as well as personal and national identity. The success of Japan's Kasuo Ohno, Taiwan's Lin Hwai Min, the older work of Thailand's Pichet Klunchun, Indonesia's Eko Supriyanto, and Cambodia's Amrita Performing Arts are examples of Asian artists or companies that have shown that there is an international market for art that is rooted in tradition. In this aspect, Malaysia has much to learn, but the successes of several graduates have served to further inspire.

Civilization, modernity, and commerce have placed greater value on some vocations over others. For obvious reasons, medicine, engineering, and law have risen to the apex of choice professions. Despite the ability of the arts to feed the soul and nourish the spirit, this value is hard to quantify, relegating the arts to positions farther down the economic ladder. Thus, another strategy in this pedagogy is introducing the artists/dancers to

Howard Gardner's theory of “**multiple intelligences**” and empowering them through new understanding. This paper reiterates the point that 11 years being side-lined in regular primary and secondary schooling due to “weak academic backgrounds” and told that they would not amount to anything in their lives is damaging. Gardner suggests that “[t]he problem lies less in the technology of testing than in the ways in which we customarily think about the intellect and in our ingrained views of intelligence” (2011: 4):

A description of use of the body as a form of intelligence may at first jar. There has been a radical disjunction in our recent cultural tradition between the activities of reasoning, on the one hand, and the activities of the manifestly physical part of our nature, as epitomized by our bodies, on the other. This divorce between the “mental” and the “physical” has not infrequently been coupled with a notion that what we do with our bodies is somehow less privileged, less special, than those problem-solving routines carried out chiefly through the use of language, logic, or some other relatively abstract symbolic system. (2011: 10)

Below is a diagrammatic interpretation of this theory.





productions to become staples in the Kuala Lumpur arts calendar, creating a brand name that is well known in the industry. In 2014, a windfall allocation of up to RM 700,000 from the Ministry, as part of its Visit Malaysia Year 2014 fund, allowed for two major projects to be undertaken. One was the production of five different performances of traditional dance in five nights, with each evening a different theme, under the umbrella of *Dancing Under the Moonlight*. Another was the *Tari '14* international dance festival, the 9<sup>th</sup> in a series that began in 1994, which gathered artists from 14 international arts institutions for four days of performances, talks, workshops, and a gala night. Students were placed in charge of, or scheduled to assist in, every aspect of the implementation of the program, from technical teams and front-of-house to liaison officers. Every single one of the participants found this an invigorating experience and, most certainly, one of the highlights of their student life. Many reported that it opened up a new world to them—making valuable contacts and new friends and appreciating their shared journeys even more.

One of the loudest bees in my bonnet is the existing chasm between academia and practice. These productions have served a very useful role in closing this gap. Other successful productions performed annually include a students' choreographic project *Gelombang Baru*, an evening of traditional dance called *Tapestry*, and even one for the lecturers called *Jamu*. The concept is that even the lecturers have to keep creating new work—at least a short new work of 10 minutes every year—challenging themselves constantly and opening them to criticism and thus keeping them honest. It is one thing to teach but quite another to produce the goods onstage.

In Malaysia, private sponsorship from the Sime Darby Foundation has provided approximately RM 500,000.00 per year for the last four years to the Faculty of Dance to run a company of outstanding graduates. It is uncertain how long this phenomenal support will continue, but, while it does, we intend to make hay. The company tours, conducts

workshops and performances, and in many ways has changed the climate of dance in Malaysia. The company has a unique multicultural repertoire that includes genres as diverse as *makyung*, *bharatanatyam*, and abstract western contemporary dance. Several graduates from the company have been further inspired to seek competitive scholarships that have taken them to foreign shores to obtain post-graduate education. There are currently about 10 of these dancers doing just this—at the University of Limerick in Ireland, Korea National University of Arts in Seoul, South Korea, Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany, the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, Hong Kong, Taipei University of the Arts in Taiwan, and Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts in Perth, Australia, to name a few—a true testimony to this ideology.

## **5. The Empowerment**

These strategies feed the imagination of the students who are most hungry. Once they realize that they are special, not in a precious or precocious way, but simply beginning to believe in themselves, the empowerment becomes palpable. They grow in confidence as people and are able to connect with others, whether within the industry, audiences, or important figures who could be helpful in their careers. Even if a child does not choose to pursue a career in dance, it is a powerful tool to develop confidence, musicality, and appreciation of art, as well as a great healthy lifestyle choice.

Ironically, despite conscious efforts to and success with excavating as well as reviving traditional dance, two of the greatest areas of achievement at ASWARA have been classical ballet and contemporary dance. While most of our dancers never studied these forms before their entry into the institution, the achievements have been admirable, even astounding. One of the reasons for this success is possibly that it is so physically challenging and exciting, while making room for freedom to explore and express (especially in contemporary dance), which appeals to young dancers.

## 6. Two Case Studies

The pedagogy of empowerment has borne fruit right before my eyes. Two of our students have particularly remarkable stories I'd like to share.

A Kedayan by ethnicity, Raziman Sarbini, who described his beginnings earlier in this paper, was born in Limbang, Sarawak. He now holds a Diploma in Dance, graduating in 2013, and, at this writing, is in his final year of his Bachelor of Dance studies. He has evolved into one of the finest dancers of his generation through many productions at ASWARA, as well as at festivals in choreography by Malaysia's leading choreographers, from traditional dance to modern ballet. Although choreography is not his main focus at present, his work on *The Hunger* entered the finals for the Short+Sweet Dance Festival<sup>15</sup> 2012 in KLPAC. At the World Championship of Performing Arts<sup>16</sup> in Los Angeles in that same year, he won several gold medals. He danced in the ensemble in classical ballet productions of *The White Bat* and *Coppelia* at the Istana Budaya, produced by Danceworks Production and choreographed by one of Malaysia's leading ballet choreographers, Choong Wan Chin, and *Panchali Sabatam*, the *bharatanatyam* dance drama by Shankar Kandasamy. He was one of the principal dancers in several contemporary works, such as *Eclectic Shift* and *Iklm* by Suhaili Ahmad Kamil, *WiRama* by Joseph Gonzales (which is performed extensively both locally and internationally), as well as the neo-classical work *Enter/Exit* by the same choreographer.

Raziman received the National Department for Arts and Culture Apprentice Grant in 2013, which enabled him to be absorbed into the professional company ADC, where he had an even greater opportunity to hone his talents. In 2014, he was the main talent in two Nestle television commercials and, later, at the 17th Solo Classical Ballet Competition organized by The Dance Society of Malaysia, Raziman won Best Modern Dancer and Overall

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.shortandsweet.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.wcopa.org>

2nd Prize with the *Le Corsaire* solo. He participated at the World Dance Movement<sup>17</sup> Workshops in Catelleno Grotte, Italy, in 2014 where he won three scholarships to attend programs by Teddy Forance (his idol) in New York and Desmond Richardson in Los Angeles in the future. In the Short+Sweet Competition by KLPAC, he was judged the Best Male Dancer 2014. In January 2015, he performed in *Short Stories*, an evening of works by American artist-scholar Patrick Suzeau to mark the end of Suzeau's Fulbright residency in Malaysia.

Another of our renowned students, Muhammad Fairul Azreen Mohd Zahid, completed his Diploma in Dance and Bachelor of Dance (Performance) Honours from ASWARA in 2012. He came to us with experience only in the traditional dance genre of *zapin*, which he learned as a student in high school. His learning curve at ASWARA was incredible, and his work to date includes innumerable productions in Malaysia and performances in Los Angeles, Philippines, Yogyakarta and Jakarta in Indonesia, and in Korea with the Sime Darby project. Fairul won the Sansha Best Modern Dancer Award at the National Ballet Competition in 2010 and performed in the ballets *Carmen*, *Don Quixote*, and *Cinderella* by Danceworks Productions at Istana Budaya and *The White Bat* in Nara City, Japan. He represented Malaysia at the World Championship of Performing Arts in Los Angeles and won five gold medals. He won 3rd Prize at the 13th National Ballet Competition and a scholarship to the Ena Ballet Studio to further train in ballet in 2011. He enjoys choreography and presents his work whenever possible. In 2012, Two won the Best Production and Best Choreography prizes at the Short+Sweet Dance Festival and, in the following year, Fairul presented it as a full-length work produced Theatre. In 2013, his choreography of *The King and I* won the MyDance Alliance and Goethe-Institut Dance Escalator Project, which included a prize to witness the Tanz Festival in Germany. In 2014, he was selected to be the choreographer

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.wdm.org>

for The Royal Arts Gala organized by My Performing Arts Agency where the musical *Mimpi Artilla* was staged. He was also thrilled to be the choreographer for his idol, Malaysia's No. 1 Artiste, Siti Norhaliza, for her concerts. He staged his second full-length work *Transcendence* with Naim Syahrazad and JS Wong in 2014.

Today, Fairul is enrolled at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, USA, pursuing an MFA in Choreography and Performance. He received the Star Scholarship Award 2014 from the Sime Darby Foundation, which was worth approximately RM 520,000 to support his education for the two-year duration of this course. He has performed with 2nd Avenue Dance Company of New York University, as well as Lane Gifford's *The Space Between*, which is a part of the Boston Arts Centre's Arts Residency Program 2015.

The above two artists represent but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the incredible journeys that begin for young dance students at ASWARA. It is extremely exciting to be a part of and to be witnessing this phenomenon thus far and to see the path unfold for various individuals, in particular, and for Malaysian arts, in general.

### Conclusion

The pedagogy of empowerment described in this paper is about making each child believe in him or herself, enabling every student to dream big dreams and achieve what even they might not have thought about or imagined was possible. It is about teaching them to rise above themselves, to mine their potential, and live a glorious, grand life, which is their right and the right of each and every child. As the character Joan Clarke says in the movie *The Imitation Game*,<sup>18</sup> "Sometimes it is the people whom no one imagines anything of who do the things that no one can imagine."

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<sup>18</sup> <http://theimitationgamemovie.com/>

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