

02/05/1997

Our very own National Theatre

Zulkifli Ahmad

"ANY hit musical in the world can be staged at the Panggung Negara when it is ready. In fact, a musical like Miss Saigon can be better staged here than in theatres in London or Australia as our stage is flexible and state-of-the-art."

So says Muhammad Kamar Yaakob, project architect for the RM195 million National Theatre now taking shape in Kuala Lumpur.

Muhammad Kamar, of ADC Akitek Sdn Bhd, won the competition - and consequently the contract - for the design of the National Theatre held by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism some time ago.

Befitting a project of this stature, efforts are not being spared to make it a national pride. For one, the theatre will have an orchestra pit that can accommodate 200 musicians. As for sight-line (view of the stage from the seats), "75 per cent of the stage will be still visible from the worst spot", says Muhammad Kamar. "This is considered to be among the best in the world."

He says the project is expected to be completed by the end of the year. "Right now, we are discussing the marble tiles to be used. We originally wanted imported marble but the Government has instructed us to go local.

"This may be good for the local industry, but the disadvantage of local marble is that stains from, say, coffee can be permanent due to the material's porosity and maturity."

Noridah Shaffii, of the Ministry's Development Division, says the marble tile company to be awarded the contract has yet to be decided upon. "We are looking for the best quality and design," she says.

"Right now we are waiting for hi-tech equipment from Belgium," says Mariam Sulaiman, assistant director of Panggung Negara. "We hope to move into the new office in the theatre by the end of the year."

Plans to build the National Theatre were mooted in the 70s but were put on hold because of the economic situation and priority given to other projects.

The Government finally agreed to the project under the Sixth Malaysia Plan after the Ministry persuaded it that the country needed a National Theatre as part of a cultural infrastructure that would include cultural parks and the Experimental Theatre, among others.

About RM50 million was allocated under the initial plans which were actually for a 800-seat theatre to be located in the Kompleks Budaya Negara at Jalan Tun Ismail, Kuala Lumpur.

The scope of the project was reviewed upon the recommendation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who felt that the National Theatre should be bigger and on par with the great theatres of the world, with a seating capacity of at least 1,500.

The Government provided a new 1.4ha site for the project at the junction of Jalan Tun Razak/Jalan Temerloh/Jalan Berserah.

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