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It's all for laughs, says Yusop Chong

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"THERE'RE no leading newspapers in Malaysia; all are misleading."

Ever thought of making a living off gags like this? Well, one person who is making a good job out of it is Yusop Chong.

Though seldom appearing on TV these days, the 50-year-old Yusop is a regular at corporate dinner shows and functions. You might have caught his stand-up act before and would probably agree if we said this man could get away with murder.

Yusop impersonates just about anyone, including Ministers, and yet he's not been sent to "Siberia. He's "done" Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik (both his favourites), Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh and even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Yusop's style is neither slapstick nor bland. He says that just as a song won't sell if it is not about love, comedy won't survive without punch lines.

"It's time we changed our tune. The trend now seems to be about two or three people yakking away onstage. That's not going to work anymore. You need some surprise elements, something that could choke the audience to death. Punch lines can do that.

"People are cleverer now. Comedians have to cater for the established market," says Yusop.

He, however, avoids racial or corruption issues. Comedy need not be at the expense of others.

"Before I start my show, I do my research. Firstly, I must find out the racial breakdown of the audience. It's important so that I'd know which material to use and which I can repeat.

"Even so, I get feedback from people who request me to repeat some. They never seem to get enough of it."

Throughout his career, Yusop has survived the challenge of having to crack the toughest, most serious-looking nuts and the most demure of ladies.

"The most important thing is to break that barrier, that wall. When you go onstage, you stare at hundreds of eyes who don't seem to give you the time of day. You wonder if they will ever laugh at your lines.

"I always arrive early for my shows so that I'm really psyched up and well-prepared for the performance. It's not easy to make people laugh, especially lawyers, accountants, Ministers, businessmen and royalty." Obviously, however, they all succumb to him.

At one show, the organiser did not allow the 58-year old comedian to mingle around. His cue to appear was walking into the room later, complete with a pair of glasses looking like Datuk Mohamad Rahmat!

Of course, the audience was surprised that the Minister should come unannounced only to break into an amused "Aiyaa!" as soon as he opened his mouth.

"At another performance at Sunway Lagoon, I was about to start the afternoon when out came Lim Keng Yaik from among the audience. He signalled that we stop the show immediately. Then he walked up to the stage where I was.

"Everyone thought, 'What now?' But as it appeared, Lim told the audience that 'This is my good friend, but he is annoying. He copies my style and

gets thousands of ringgit while I get nothing."

Samy Vellu also has high regard for Yusop.

"I like him. I become more popular this way and I can improve my Bahasa Malaysia to boot. Because he makes fun of me to earn a living, I'll give him a chance."

Truly, the fact that Yusop is able to deliver his lines without much furore from Ministers is seen as a step forward. To top it all, who else would dare dedicate songs to them but Yusop?

He dedicates Wooden Heart to Ting Chew Peh, Am I That Easy To Forget to Tun Ghafar Baba, Highway To Heaven to Samy Vellu, My Way to the Prime Minister, Bridge Over Troubled Water to Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, Suci Dalam Debu to Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Aziz, You Only Live Twice to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and I'll Be There to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"Not to sound condescending, I'm happier when the audience is educated. It becomes a challenge. I like it more if there are people like Datuk Lee Lam Thye, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Khir Johari."

Yusop's partner, Hamdan Sulaiman, says: "If he had performed the same shows 20 years ago, he would have been arrested. Now, he gets awards for his work."

(Yusop received the Pingat Bintang Kebaktian Masyarakat from the Sultan of Kedah last year.)

So, who writes his lines? Yusop works with Hamdan, who does the scripts for his shows. Their collaboration goes back to 1986.

"Yusop was discovered by Tan Sri Sanusi Junid about 10 years ago," says Hamdan. "At that time, he was a storekeeper at the Fisheries Department. Sanusi is like a talent scout. When he saw Yusop, he requested that Yusop be transferred to his department so that he could join Seni Tani."

"Seni Tani is a group of 60 people who perform shows and do comedy acts. However, Yusop's weakness is that he cannot perform with others. He didn't shine in a group, hence we encouraged him to go on his own."

"His first break came in 1992 when he got a chance to appear on a TV programme, Anekarama '92. His famous line until now, was, when he imitated Samy Vellu: "Dulu kita ada pos laju. Sekarang kita ada 'super' pos laju. Pagi kita pos, semalam sampai."

"I've tried working with other people but we don't gel. With Hamdan, it's easier. Hamdan isn't my manager per se, we just work together," adds Yusop, who comes from Jeniang, Kedah.

Hamdan says: "Yusop is a talented person. I may have written the materials for him, but if he didn't tambah (add) and give them that extra kick, they wouldn't have worked too."

He says: "So far, Yusop is successful with his jokes, which are inspired by current issues. People do laugh at themselves."

In the West, writing comedy materials has been an age-old practice. Bob Hope, for example, has seven scriptwriters and thousands of gags and one-liners. Now, Yusop Mat Said (his real name) wants to broaden his horizons. He wants to cut an album. He plans to record interviews with the ministers and others which he did at his shows.

"I don't want to restrict myself to singing because then I would have to sing Malay numbers and then only the Malays could understand it. So I thought if I did an album that features my interviews with the Ministers, more people could enjoy it."

Yusop is taking a break this Ramadan. His only wish is that, when he resumes his career, "the people whom I imitate do not resign. Otherwise, I would have to scurry for fresh material."

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