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Living arts on fabled island

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THE difference is not noticeable. If he hadn't told me, I wouldn't have noticed - a lighter Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, by a good 5kg, which he claimed to have shed recently. All that running around to get sponsors and attending to the nitty-gritty for his pet project - the Langkawi International Festival of Arts (Lifa) - must have taken its toll.

But really, he's such an effervescent little dynamo, even for his advancing 64 years, that you know that "Ib", as he is more fondly known, will pull through - and, with flying colours somehow, despite the odds, or in spite of them.

Ib, after all, was the impresario of two Club Mediterranee Asian Arts Festivals - in Bali, Indonesia, and in Cherating, Pahang - several years ago.

He's back at his Bukit Pantai home in Kuala Lumpur, for a whirlwind sponsorship bout, while his wife Sim mans things at the other end in his museum in Langkawi.

It's been 1 1/2 years since I last met him, at his museum foundation sanctuary named after him in Datai, in the southwestern littoral fringe of Langkawi in what is perhaps one of the most ong (auspicious) snatches of land on that fabled island.

A museum-in-the-rainforest overlooking the Andaman Sea, with the Gunung Macincang backdrop, a mountain naturally rich in Tongkat Ali (*Grewia umbellata*) and where hornbills and eagles soar and monkeys and mousedeer roam. On the seaside, cavorting dolphins have been sighted with otters and shoals of plankton.

A living combination of art and nature that's Godsend.

In the museum proper, a white pristine pasillade among verdant greenery, all his paintings done between 1987 and 1998 were on the walls of the 16,000 square feet of built-up space of available infrastructure - the first time his works are on public view locally since his 1986 Retrospective at the National Art Gallery (then at Jalan Hishamudin, in Kuala Lumpur).

With the deadline to the big day, Oct 26, fast diminishing, Ib has hit over-drive to get sponsorships for some of the big-name participants and also the local component for this truly "global village" festival of the new millennium - a unique celebration and fusion of artistic excellence, inspiration and creative expressions.

There are 200 foreign participants who will be coming under the aegis of the Rome-based Caschi Bianchi Europa Foundation (White Helmets Europe Foundation), which is co-organising the event with the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation (IHMCF).

There will be painters, sculptors, musicians, poets, dancers, designers and other "Beautiful People" - glitterati the likes of which Langkawi has never seen before.

Those who have confirmed to date include:

Barefoot flamenco dancer La Chunga and virtuoso guitarist Paco Prada; Mexican sculptor Sebastian; French light-and-sound specialist Theirry Vide; Thailand's flamboyant Thawan Duchanee; Japan's Yoshio Kitayama and Masao Yoshimura; Ingrid S. Santamaria, whose music foundation in the Philippines runs two children's orchestra and herself a concert pianist; Hong Kong's architect/designer Taoho, the one who designed the SAR flag; Indian artists Sri Ramesh Bisht, Shri Shal Choyal and Sujeet Choyal;

Macau artist Carlos Marreiros; photographer Princess Hohenlof; Mexican actress Monserrat Lopez Merino; antiquarian Lorenzo Stiges; and Sylvestre Verger, the man who commissioned about 40 artists to paint on the Berlin Wall and owns the collection of the fragments.

Also coming is the world-famous Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre of Vietnam.

On the local front, there will be the Penang-born/Rome-based installation artist Peter Lim; and Japanese-born conceptual artist Hitori Nakayama, and Machiko Nakayama.

"Locally, maybe I can invite a theatre group to perform three short plays, 10 contemporary artists, and some dancers," says Ib, the festival director who will also have to oversee other things like food, accommodation, security, transport, Customs and immigration (in terms of equipment and in case of "unrecognised" political affiliations).

Already, he has the support of hotels there, who to date, have pledged 70 rooms for 12 nights, with some throwing in breakfasts and cocktail receptions. Others include offers of yachts and boats, Venus art materials, and Langkawi marble (the remnants).

There will be pre-publicity in places like Italy, where the Rome-based TeleMonte-Carlo will air a segment about the museum, with its writer Andrea Pancani writing about it in his newspaper columns.

Neuronet, the host of Ib's website ihmcf.org, will also be updating ongoing events during the festival, making it a "virtual festival" for the wired world.

His mind teems with ideas, and his high standards is a lesson in visionary planning.

Already, he has mock-ups of posters with the shell-inspired logo of the festival (done for gratis by our own advertising guru Datuk Johan Ariff), the banners, name tags, invitation cards and standees.

The Langkawi Development Authority (Lada) will help out in expertise and logistics.

Efforts by Ib to get some of the fellow awardees of the Crystal Award, bestowed by the World Economic Forum, in 1997, and others who have pledged works for his museum like the Danish designer Per Arnoldi, were not fruitful because of the short notice.

But with Lifa planned on a biennial basis and to alternate with the Langkawi International Maritime and Airshow (LIMA), Ib's confident of stellar fare the next time around as well.

What's on paper promises to be an explosive catalyst of creative combustion. There will be workshops, studios, performances, exhibitions, poetry recitals, short theatre plays.

"Works done during the festival will be donated to the museum. As it is a public trust foundation, this means that whatever is donated belongs to every Malaysian."

It will not be all art and no play for the "guests". Indeed, as artists, they are not expected to come up with anything during the festival itself, though the congregation of people excellent in various disciplines could spark some creative nerves.

Participants can follow the 1.5km rainforest trail from the museum reaching up to the hill summit and down to the mangrove swamps with a helpful fun guide created by artist Jaafar Taib, who is better known for his spectacular bird paintings, and his Gila-Gila magazine humour.

There will also be a memorable eco-tour by boat - first to a place where people made charcoal in a mud-kiln several hundred years ago, and where they could have spring water.

"The tour includes a trip to Pulau Dengli nearby. At 7.30pm sharp, flying foxes will swarm the island, and at 7.45pm, they (the foxes) will

fly off in various directions to forage for food. It's a sight to behold to see their silhouette in the sunset.

"On the way back, you can see shoals of plankton in the water near the museum bay."

The finale on Nov 4 will be a beach party at Tanjung Rhu to be organised by Club Med, who will be flying some GOs (guest officers) from Phuket for the event.

It will also be the official opening of the museum by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who on Dec 11, 1992, launched the project at the KL Hilton. Work on the museum started only in December 1997, with the "first phase" of infrastructure completed a year later.

Since then, a serpentine path of cement slabs with crude inscriptions by Ib has been set up leading to a bungalow promontory, which will be the core of a proposed cultural community centre, with chalets for artists doing residency programmes.

Though Ib has laid off his canvas for the last five months because of his commitment to the festival project, he says: "The festival is part of the reality of the museum, the dream of getting the place, in creating a living arts centre."

And then, not in bravado but like a statement of fact, his parting shot: "I have a feeling that this will be more interesting than Bali." You'd better believe him.

For details on the festival, e-mail ibhusein@ihmcf.org, or call 04-9594669, or fax: 04-9594670.

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