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Chew pushes back the frontiers

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THE first movie Jared Chew remembers watching is The Lone Ranger. He was in primary school and the little black and white television set became his greatest companion for a long time. It was the Lone Ranger who got him into all things "cowboy".

At 1.75m tall and packing a sturdy, stocky build, he looks every bit a cowboy. "I love it! I like the action-packed westerns, and Red Indians, and horses and the barren terrain they fight on. Just beautiful."

He does not strike you as someone easily excitable, though. In fact, he is as cool as they come. He chooses his words carefully, and appears to be a sweet kind of guy. But talk to him about dinosaurs and you will see an immediate change.

He becomes animated and leaves you wondering what the connection is between cowboys and dinosaurs. Maybe it's to do with braving unknown frontiers. Chew is the creator of 'Dinosaurs Alive!', an exhibition that first took off in May at the Summit shopping complex in USJ, Subang Jaya which was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

That exhibition attracted more than 600,000 people. Today 'Dinosaurs Alive! Megashow' opens as anchor entertainment at Pesta Pulau Pinang 2001. Another is on at the X'tra Supermarket carpark lot in Johor Baru called, what else, the 'Dinosaurs Alive! Road Tour'.

His sweet demeanour belies a shrewd business acumen.

"This is a cash business and MAE (MAE Engineering Ltd of which he is a shareholder) took the opportunity to jump into it for that very reason. But I also did it because of the interest," says the 43-year-old entrepreneur with 18 years of experience in the construction business.

"I studied spending patterns and was able to see how consumers behaved. I realised there was a changing need. There were new markets to tap into. And there was a dire need to get into a niche business."

He saw a great opportunity in 'Dinosaurs Alive!' and convinced his directors. The Singapore-born Chew studied up to 'A' levels and then joined the compulsory army service for 2 1/2 years in Singapore. He was made sergeant of the artillery unit and was awarded the Best Soldier of the Month in his first year.

Later, he joined an oil company as an accounts clerk. Sheer determination shone through and he was promoted to head the production unit in planning and supplies at the company within three months.

After a couple of years, he decided to try something different and chose construction. "I went into building materials specifically. And with nearly two decades of experience in the construction sector, which I enjoyed thoroughly, I can safely say that now, I can build, design and engineer exhibition sets pretty easily."

And so, the kampung boy as he calls himself, has done his family, relatives and friends proud. Interestingly, he says he was born in a village called Nee Soon, "which is now extinct, just like the dinosaurs". He says this with another smile.

Apart from his trusted TV, his favourite pastimes when he was young involved spider-fighting and making firecrackers which nearly cost him his finger. "Thank God they could stitch it back. What kind of a cowboy would I be now if I handled a harness with nine fingers? And what about the gloves ...?"

The Dinosaur Cowboy now sits proudly among the big corporate boys. He is

the executive director of Technology MAE Sdn Bhd, registered in Malaysia as a subsidiary of MAE Engineering Ltd, a public-listed company in Singapore.

In March, Dino-MAE, also another subsidiary of MAE Engineering, bought the assets and rights to the creations by Dinamation, an American-based company that makes lifesize animatronically-enhanced dinosaurs. This gave MAE Engineering various rights to the business - becoming the owner of the exhibits, the manager of events churned out by using the exhibits, and having the rights to the technical expertise like running, maintaining, repairing and creating animated robotics creatures.

"We can hold exhibition shows and world tours; we can create or manufacture new dinosaurs like the lifesize animatronically-enhanced Spinosaurus that even reputed movie studios do not have or own; and make Hollywood-styled theme parks based on dinosaurs."

He explains that the Hollywood-styled theme park in Penang is replete with the best of technologies and mechanisms for a theme park. Under his guidance, the face of the old annual funfair grounds in the Pearl of the Orient was given a facelift in a month.

"There will be a first of many things within this megashow where dinosaurs are concerned," he said with enthusiasm. "The first ever animatronically-enhanced Spinosaurus - it costs US\$500,000! (RM1.9 million) - will be unveiled here. This creature is the one and only in the world and is making its debut in Penang."

"What you see in the Jurassic Park movies are all computer-generated images. They build one side of the dinosaur, shoot it on film, then place the image in the computer and work on making it move and roar through computer graphics. That's what you see on your TV screen. But the one we have at the megashow, is a fully built animal with built-in robotics. It moves and roars on its own."

The megashow will also feature other record-breaking feats in Malaysia, apart from Spinosaurus, like the first ever made-in-Malaysia dinosaurs and the biggest ever animatronics show held in the country.

"What I do now is look for suitable sites all over and approach the relevant state authorities to work with them on putting up exhibitions. That was how it happened in Penang." It is also his method of operation - jumping on the bandwagon to see where it goes - that earned him the cowboy tag.

"I've done enough research to conclude that with 'Dinosaurs Alive!', business is pretty safe. It may not be recession-proof, but it is to a certain extent resistant to adverse economic effects, because it doesn't really need to depend on any single industry. Hey, families need entertainment!"

It was that conviction that saw him single-handedly orchestrating the near impossible with the first exhibition at the Summit. It was put up in 45 days in an area of 2,700 square metres. The one in Johor Baru of half the size was set up in a week. And another record-breaking stunt was to put up the megashow at Pesta Pulau Pinang - which is three times the size of the exhibition at the Summit - within a month.

The workaholic Chew will never stop, nor will he be satisfied with the shows running in Penang and Johor Baru. He is now replacing the 'Dinosaurs Alive!' show at the Summit with a theme park called "Myths and Legends" showcasing dragons and dungeons, sea dinosaurs and prehistoric creatures like the mammoth. And this, he will do in less than a month. This next show is slated to open officially at the end of November.

Certainly with this cowboy, it is never a case of biting off more than he can chew. His wealth of experience, confidence and tenacity will see him tackling more new frontiers.

They don't call him cowboy for nothing.

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