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Life as a work of art

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'I HAVE A dream,' said American Civil Rights movement leader Martin Luther King Jr. Amidst the spiralling racism of the 1960s, he dared to dream of an equal America, where blacks and whites could walk down the same street hand in hand.

Likewise, one of Malaysia's most celebrated artists, Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, too had a dream - albeit a different kind. But unlike King who died before his dream was realised, Ib, as he is fondly known, has lived to see his come true. For Ib, the last 35 years has indeed been like a dream.

When Malaysian Business caught up with him at his home-cum-museum at the fabled island of Langkawi, he says, 'I have been enjoying a life of vacation - doing the things that I love such as painting, travelling and exhibiting my art. It is like a dream.'

Today, the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation is the pinnacle of his dreams. Located at the northwest of Langkawi Island along Pantai Pasir Tengkorak - or Sandy Beach of Skulls - his RM10-million museum in the rainforest is an impressive arts centre in a contemporary setting, bounded both by age-old tropical rainforests and the roaring waves of the Andaman Sea.

Ib, whose passion for art has never been fuelled by fame or glory, has dedicated this museum to all Malaysians who appreciate the beauty of art. At the invitation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Ib has turned the legendary islands of Langkawi into the focal point of all things artistic.

Sandwiched between Phuket and Bali, Langkawi is dwarfed by their attractions in the artistic scene; both Phuket and Bali play home to a burgeoning art industry. Hence, if there's one aspect of Ib's dream that has not materialised it is the dream to see Langkawi emerge as an international arts centre - not only for painting and sculpture, but also for the performing arts such as traditional and contemporary theatre, dance, music and poetry.

Last year, in conjunction with his grand opening of the museum, Ib organised the inaugural Langkawi International Festival of Arts (Lifa). Having organised similar arts festivals such as the Asian Arts Festival in Bali (1987) and Cherating (1988), Ib had the right experience to conceive Lifa.

Nevertheless, some critics say the festival still has room for improvement. They argue that with better funding and strong governmental support, future Lifa events can be more successful, perhaps even rivaling the much-acclaimed Singapore Festival of Arts.

Ib and his wife Sim Hussein are fiercely protective of their pet project. Says Sim, 'Art is something very difficult to organise in this country. Many Malaysians fail to see the bigger picture.' She continues, 'We are not out to make money, but to create an understanding.' Unlike a business venture where profits become the yardstick for success, in art, it is understanding that matters most. Says Ib, 'There is no such thing as human perfection, there is always a need for improvement, but what matters too is that we did our best.'

Despite the criticism, Lifa was deemed a successful start for artistic events in Malaysia by many. The festival reverberated the islands of Langkawi with the rhythms and colours of the world of arts. From La

Chunga, Spain's renowned flamenco dancer, to Vietnam's Thang Long Water Puppet, for 10 days, Langkawi became the focal point, playing host to artists, painters, sculptors, theatre troupes and opera singers.

Close friends since 1995, Jullie P Ligan, executive creative director of TBWA-ISC Malaysia Sdn Bhd, credits both Ib and Sim for single-handedly spearheading Lifa. She says Lifa would not have been possible had it not been for Ib's friendship with other world-renowned artists. Says Ligan, 'I cannot imagine Lifa without Ib and Sim, because Lifa to me, is indeed Ib and Sim!'

But unlike the vibrant colours of the artistic world, Ib has a very simple perception of life. Unlike philosophers who can sit for hours splitting hairs over life's petty issues, Ib's idea of life is closely linked to art. 'Each person is born with art, only later will you discover the art inside yourself.' He likens art to the soul of life, 'From the moment you begin thinking, art comes into play.' Echoing her husband's thoughts, Sim says, 'Everyone needs art or life would be boring.'

When asked what inspires him, the 64-year-old Ib says, 'I do not stare at the sunset and then become inspired.' Inspirations have to come naturally; from the moment you are awake to when you are dreaming in your sleep. In short, life itself becomes his inspiration. Even then, he chuckles, 'If there is such a thing as an inspiration.'

However, life was not always a bed of roses for Ib. Born to a poor family of six in Sungai Limau Dalam - a traditional padi hamlet in the breadbasket state of Kedah - his upbringing was tough as his father, Nyak Hussein, did not have money to send him out of the kampung school. So, Ib the kampung boy began his early education at the village school. But his father's determination and hard work saw him save enough money to send Ib to study in Alor Setar, the state capital of Kedah.

From Alor Setar, Ib went on to Kulim and Sungai Petani, managing to complete his Senior Cambridge in the process. Subsequently, Ib's started his formal art education at Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, but unfortunately, after a short six-month stint, he left.

Art comes rather naturally for this gifted artist. Instead of learning how to draw and paint, he decided to make drawing a living. For three-and-a-half years, Ib worked for Master Ltd, then Singapore's largest advertising agency. Lady luck, however, was on Ib's side and he was offered a scholarship to study at the Byam Shaw School Of Painting and Drawing in London. He was one of the few Asian students at the prestigious institution. But upon his arrival at the-then Malaya Hall, his luck ran out. Ib's clothes - neatly packed into a giant trunk - went missing the next morning. Literally with nothing but the shirt on his back, help came in the form of a fellow Malaysian, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the then-president of the Kesatuan Melayu United Kingdom (UK).

In his span of eight years in the UK, Ib was awarded a much-coveted scholarship to further his studies at the London Royal Academy of Fine Arts. He was also awarded the John D Rockefeller III Fund for a three-year stint at the Big Apple. The rest, as they say, is history.

Would things have been different had he been more privileged as a child? Ib doesn't think so. 'It is not material riches that mould a person, but the human values that make a person who he is.'

Ib's ideas for the drawing board come mainly from what he feels, and historical events. Among his most distinguished works include Pak Utih, Senyum Seorang Monyet, Bandit Queen, May 13 and Aung San Suu Kyi. In his museum, two paintings particularly stand out: Cambodia (1998) and Azteca (also 1998). The former depicts the late Cambodian despot Pol Pot peering out of the gigantic edifice of the Angkor Wat; an interesting combination, considering his notoriety in history as the person responsible for the

massacre of a third of Cambodia's population. The latter, a large acrylic canvas, captures the images of the Aztec civilisation in the design of a sun disk.

The Regent of Selangor, Tengku Idris Shah, an avid collector of Asian art, has this to say about Ib, 'I see him not only for his masterpieces but, most importantly, for his sincerity and friendship.' Fondly referring to Ib as Ibs, Tengku Idris describes him as a very down-to-earth person. He has no qualms about sharing his ideas, thoughts and problems with Ib. 'He is a good problem solver.

'We cheer each other up and laugh ourselves out,' he continues. Tengku Idris first met Ib at Malaysia Hall in London in the 1960s. For Tengku Idris, all of 16 then, Ib was merely an acquaintance. However, by the mid-1980s, their friendship had flourished, courtesy of their shared passion for adventure which sees them exchanging notes on their various global encounters. 'As you know him better, you realise the vibrant and colourful nature of Ib's life,' says Tengku Idris.

Although Tengku Idris sees less of Ib nowadays, he makes it a point to visit him whenever he is on the island. Similarly, whenever Ib is in Kuala Lumpur, he drops by for a chat at the Havana Club or the Hard Rock Cafe. As Tengku Idris says, 'Money can be lost but friendship lasts a lifetime.'

Behind every successful man, there is a woman, it has been said. Nowhere is this adage more clearly visible than in the case of Ib. Sim, an artist herself with two exhibitions to her credit, has known Ibrahim since she was 18, sharing his dream and working tirelessly to help him realise that dream. Kajang-born and Kuantan-bred, Sim has been a pillar of strength for her husband, 'For more than 30 years, we have been travelling together, and it has been an enjoyable learning process for me.' More than just wife and confidant, Sim is also Ib's right-hand woman, organising most of his art events. 'Sometimes, it can be a real torture for Sim,' says Ib in jest. However, her hard work has not gone unnoticed as Ib appreciates her all the more for it. 'It is the greatest gift to have a person who can fully understand you,' he says gratefully.

Complementing the marital partnership is their only daughter, Alia Ibrahim. While both parents are artistically inclined, Alia is more partial towards the sciences with her analytical abilities. She is currently pursuing her degree in natural science with a major in genetics at Cambridge University. 'Not that she cannot draw, but she prefers mathematics and sciences,' quips her proud father. Ib and Sim couldn't be happier that Alia has turned out well, considering her unconventional background. Ib says that Alia used to find it difficult to describe his occupation to her friends as most of them had parents who were either doctors, lawyers or engineers. 'My father plays with paints,' was what she used to say.

Ib has been lucky, to a certain extent, in juggling his responsibilities as a parent and an artist as unlike most business and corporate figures, he is not bogged down by stressful deadlines. 'If you enjoy what you are doing, it becomes your hobby,' he says. Unlike corporate figures who require a hobby to escape the pressures of the business world, Ib has no need for such outlets.

Nevertheless, with increasing awareness of art, art is no longer just for art's sake. It is also a growing business. Just as 1960s pop-artist Andy Warhol had predicted, art has become a big business. Masterpieces are no longer valued merely for their aesthetic value but also for their investment worth. With some paintings changing hands at millions of dollars, this is hardly surprising. In a similar light, Ib's works are said to fetch prices much higher than other local artists. However, as Tengku Idris cautions, 'An artist should never over-commercialise his

work.'

Ib is in total agreement. 'You cannot draw art just to please your customer,' he says. It must reflect the feelings of the artist and come punctuated with qualities of originality and creativity. Ib should know. After all, he has lived his entire life in pursuit of art as he sees it, without being blinded by fame or glory.

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