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We must dare to dream

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AT YTL's Three Tenors concert at Bukit Bintang on Monday evening, like Tan Sri Yeoh Tiong Lay, the chief host, I felt a tinge of sadness that Bukit Bintang had lost an important historical landmark: the BBGS or the Bukit Bintang Girls School. My only daughter, like the tycoon's younger daughter, was a pupil there.

BBGS, in spite of strong protests by old pupils, well wishers and concerned heritage group, was razed to the ground a month or two before the New Year by the owners and developers who acquired it.

In 2000, YTL honoured BBGS by integrating the school into the backdrop for the stage for the now popular Bukit Bintang Walk New Year Eve's concert.

BBGS was historical as well as a beautiful edifice. What saddened me as it did thousands of others, was that none of the then powers that be, bothered to look at BBGS from the point of architecture and history.

I do hope something with character is put up in its place, although I fear that this is just wishful thinking.

The three tenors - Tito Beltran, Fabio Sartori and Hong Kong Chinese Warren Mok, accompanied by the Italian Symphonic Orchestra, joined by some young Malaysian musicians under conductor Andrea Griminelli - were excellent.

I thoroughly enjoyed the evening. The three sang Legenda, the song made famous by Shiela Majid, in beautiful, unaccented Malay in the manner of music.

Tan Sri Musa Hitam who sat beside me said the song was dedicated in honour of the legendary P. Ramlee, the evening to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Just after ushering in 2002, I thought my wife and I were free to party all night when I remembered that this article needed writing. I woke up late on Tuesday. Though still dazed and feeling exhausted as darkness commenced, it may seem late to start thinking about the Malaysian dream, I scribbled this.

Thirty nine years ago - August 28 1963 - Martin Luther King addressed a massive gathering of coloured Americans in Washington DC to celebrate 100 years of Abraham Lincoln's emancipation proclamation which launched a successful campaign for justice for US blacks. He said he had a dream which was to open the doors of opportunity to all God's children, where Americans would not be judged by the colour of their skin but by "the content of their character".

What is my dream, or shall I call it the Malaysian dream? I believe it's the idea of freedom and opportunity that motivated the framers of our 44-year old constitution; the political and spiritual strength of the Malaysian nation. The Malaysian dream is the soul of the Malaysian body politic.

In 1960, the year I went to the US, the poet Archibald MacLeish, debating "the American national purpose" said: "There are those, I know, who will reply that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind, is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is. It is the American dream."

I like to think the Malaysian dream is stressing opportunity for all: larger economic chances for the deprived majority and greater political scope for the minority. I dream of less racial segregation in or outside

schools. I would like to see more integration, less suspicion and even more progressive legislation to achieve all this.

We have a relatively free society, the freest in the Asean region. Well, free in the sense that every Malaysian worth his salt is the architect of his own ambitions. Aren't you?

Of course, Malaysians wish for a just society. The wealth and opportunity must reach out to all.

The Bumiputera community has much to seek from the other Malaysians, as it has given much, much that it alone can give.

The Malays, in particular, do not have a long tradition of learning. Have we produced in Malay, or in English, or in Arabic, a literature or music that is of lasting worth and which is our gift to the world? Works which imply our exquisite sensitivities and lamentations, in keeping with the temperament of our people? No, no. I am sorry.

But all is not lost. The Malays and Malaysians can do in 2002 and beyond what they failed to produce in the past.

In order to be a great people, Malaysians must have the dream and must be brave enough to battle false and unenlightened philosophies and out-of-date ideologies.

They must emphasise equally the importance of materialism, spiritual and intellectual pursuits. A narrow and intolerant Islam will jeopardise all that we have achieved and can attain.

The Malaysian dream defies definition as much as it invites discussion; what I dream of is a combination of freedom, stability, opportunity and social justice.

I strongly believe in the Malaysian dream because I have seen it come true at a personal level.

In our brief independent history, we have performed well but we could have done better. And are we all ready to work harder to build an even more affluent nation.

I know 2002 brings us greater challenges and promises. It's time for renewals and new beginnings. We ourselves, at the New Straits Times and its stable of publications, shall strive to serve you better and provide you with coverage which is balanced for you to make more informed decisions.

It's a good thing the thought counts, because I too want you to share our dream, something virtually new to some people.

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