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Being a funny man is no joke at all here

By Johan Jaaffar

THE hall was eerily quiet when Yusof Chong made his entrance. Even the little boys and girls stood still. After all, it was a makeshift hall in a Chinese temple. Yusof was literally sweating. It was a crowd unlike any other he had encountered. Except for his handlers, the rest were Chinese.

What was a Malay stand-up comedian doing in a place like that? Many in the crowd were probably wondering. It was election time. Barisan Nasional needed to win in the area. Sungai Lalang in the parliamentary constituency of Merbuk was still regarded as "unsafe" for BN in the last general election. DAP was contesting, and Pas was traditionally strong in the neighbouring Malay area. So, every Chinese vote counted. And Yusof was sent to help out a BN candidate.

He started rather awkwardly, greeting them in Hokkien. To his horror, there was no response. He knew the trick - do "the Keng Yaik" thing. Initially, there were smiles. Then giggles. Soon, he had them in stitches. The ice was broken. There was clapping and cheering. Yusof went into autopilot.

The country's best mimic of politicians, leaders and artists was showing his true colours. Even in a Chinese crowd, Yusof had shown a good artist transcends race.

Yusof is better known for impersonating Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik, Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and Tan Sri Mohamad Rahmat among others. He made his name and has earned a living doing that. He seldom disappoints his crowd. Yusof has done it in the presence of commoners and royalty alike. He observes their mannerism studiously and every gesture is honed to perfection. In fact, the three personalities have accepted that they are popular with Yusof's audience. Keng Yaik good-heartedly told Yusof, Boleh cari makan tiru saya, tapi jangan lebih, ah? (You can earn a living impersonating me, but know your limit).

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad did not escape Yusof's interest either. Even Dr Mahathir found Yusof's "version" of him hilarious. After many years of impersonating Dr Mahathir, something happened at a posh hotel in Hong Kong not too long ago.

He was invited to do a stand-up act in the presence of Malaysian and Hong Kong businessmen. The emcee jokingly announced the arrival of "the Prime Minister of Malaysia". They all knew Dr. Mahathir was not there. It was Yusof making his grand entry. The crowd stood up and gave a standing ovation.

It was not for him, he reckoned, it was the mere mention of Dr Mahathir that moved the audience. Yusof was on the verge of tears. That was how much the audience respected the man. Yusof gave his best performance that evening and this time they gave a standing ovation to the comedian himself.

He was born Yusof Mat Said in 1947 at Kampung Jeniang, Kuala Muda, Kedah. He went to Sekolah Abdul Halim, Jitra. There he developed a penchant for impersonating his teachers. He specialises in impersonating Cikgu Shannon Ahmad, who later became one of the country's best novelists. Shannon became a Pas member and won the parliamentary seat of Baling in the 1999 elections.

But Yusof was more than just an impersonator to his friends. He was a good story-teller as well. Ok, many of the stories were mere concoctions. Nonetheless he was called Kaki Chong - literally a bluffer - by his

friends. Thus, the name "Yusof Chong" which he adopted when he went into show business.

Yusof realised stand-up comedy was a new genre in the country. Jenaka is basically slapstick comedy. A comedian must make his audience laugh by doing silly things on stage. Things have not changed much since the Bangsawan days. Even today, you can watch the crude gestures and silly jokes they called comedy.

Yusof may not be the best comedian around. But he wants to be different. He has his own strength. He wants everyone to be comfortable with his jokes.

You want him to sing like the legendary P. Ramlee? He can even mimic Ramlee's breathing. You want him to do M. Daud Kilau? He will give you a gelek (gyrating) Daud - sunglasses and all. You want a Zain Azman look-alike? No problem. Remember the legendary Louis Amstrong? No one mimics him better than Yusof. And he is famous for "bringing" Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley, Engelbert Humperdinck or Cliff Richard to Malaysia.

Yusof is as comfortable doing P. Ramlee or Zain Azman as he is impersonating S.M. Salim, Ahmad Jais, Ahmad Daud or L. Ramlee. He can't be told from the real M. Sharif, the "Pop Yeh Yeh" king who singled-handedly rejuvenated the "swing 60s" of Malay music.

Yusof stands above the rest simply because he does his homework. In a reunion of matrons and nurses, he made it a point to learn an old Tamil song made famous by A.M. Raja in the 40s. To make sure his largely Punjabi crowd was happy, he sang Mohd Rafi's Likhe Jo Khat Tuje from the Hindi movie Kanyadan.

He believes there is a niche for stand-up comedians in this country. But, sadly, TV stations are reluctant to offend VIPs. So, Yusof is at the mercy of show organisers who would rather invite recording artists. Life is tough for him. Invitations are few and far in between. Yet he soldiers on.

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