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`Kind' Budget for the arts hailed

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TRADITIONALLY, the entertainment sector has always been overshadowed by other sectors in terms of Budget "goodies".

There's no doubt that many art-related performances have had the moral support necessary for them to thrive. And large-scale festivals such as the Penang-YTL Festival of Arts and productions by theatre companies (such as Five Arts Centre and the Actors Studio Theatre) have provided people with varied entertainment experiences.

However, the arts are also dependent on financial support to remain active.

Therefore, the Budget 2004 announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Friday has given the sector a much-needed boost.

Among the benefits to be enjoyed by the arts is the allocation of RM80.3 million for arts and culture training, aimed at increasing the quality and awareness of local arts.

In addition, the Government has provided several tax incentives to encourage arts activities, including exemptions of entertainment duty on stage performances and increased deduction on contributions by the private sector to sponsor performances by local artistes.

Here's what some theatre practitioners have to say about Budget 2004:

* Faridah Merican (co-director of The Actors Studio): "I screamed and screamed, and didn't sleep till 5am! I was so happy to know that the arts had been taken into consideration, and this definitely means a brighter future for those involved in the arts. The tax exemption is actually a much-needed relief for us, as it is not easy for any performer to pay the tax up front.

"I also think the sum of RM80.3 million for arts training and education is a much-needed boost. However, arts education is not only available in universities and learning institutions. The Actors Studio Theatre is one of the many places where arts education is also provided. So I hope it will include us as well."

* Marion D'Cruz (founder member and executive producer of Five Arts Centre, as well as a dance teacher at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan's (ASK) Dance Department): "I heard the Budget on the radio, and I think that the incentives are very timely indeed, as it's what we have been fighting for years to achieve. I teach dance at ASK and we have talented youngsters who become dancers after graduation.

"The Budget will be very beneficial to these young professionals, who need support in their craft. The Budget will definitely help the performing arts in the long run."

* Kathy Rowland (co-founder of kakiseni.com): "I think the Budget is fantastic. The tax exemption will ease red tape in the performing arts, and I also think the incentive in tax deductions for corporate sponsors is a good move. We have always had corporations who are willing to sponsor the arts, and the deductions will encourage the corporations to come forward and lend their support."

* Krishen Jit (veteran playwright): "The tax deduction is a good idea, as it will encourage more corporate sponsors to support the art. But there is a problem with the RM80.3 million fund. How will it be spent, and who is in control of the fund? A more systematic structure is necessary so that the money reaches those who need it. I remember that a sum of RM50 million was allocated in the Budget five or six years ago for the same

purpose but nobody knows where it went."